Guitar MAGAZINE

JUNE 2019
ISSUE 369
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STAR PLAYERS & THEIR *Signature* GUITARS

HOW ARTISTS ARE CHANGING THE GUITAR INDUSTRY

SHEERAN BY LOWDEN
THE FIRST REVIEW

GN'R LEGENDS **SLASH** & **DUFF** ON **GIBSON** AND **FENDER**

St. Vincent's AFFORDABLE NEW MODEL REVIEWED INSIDE

TOM MISCH
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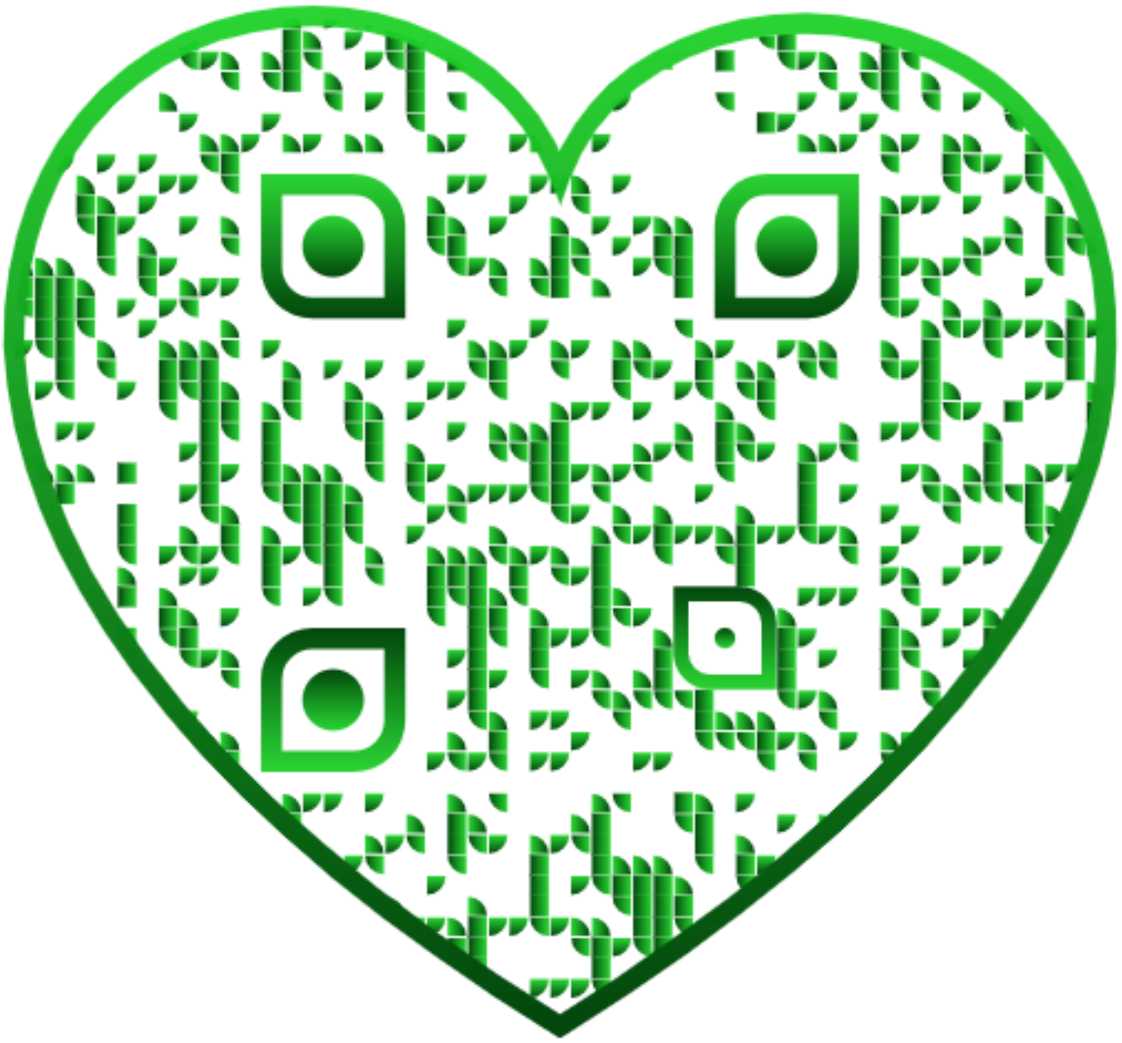
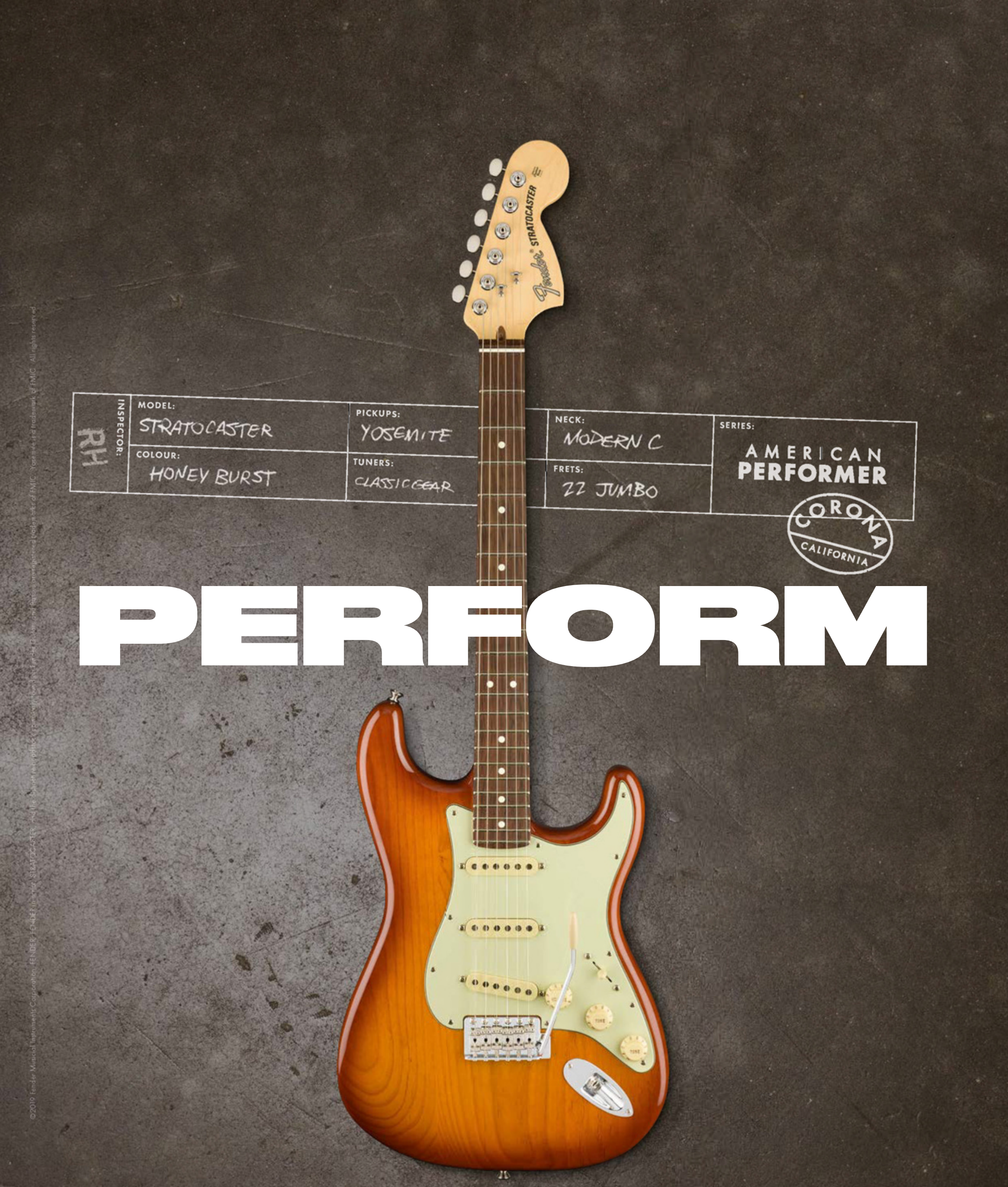


MADELO

ARTIST: TOM MISCH



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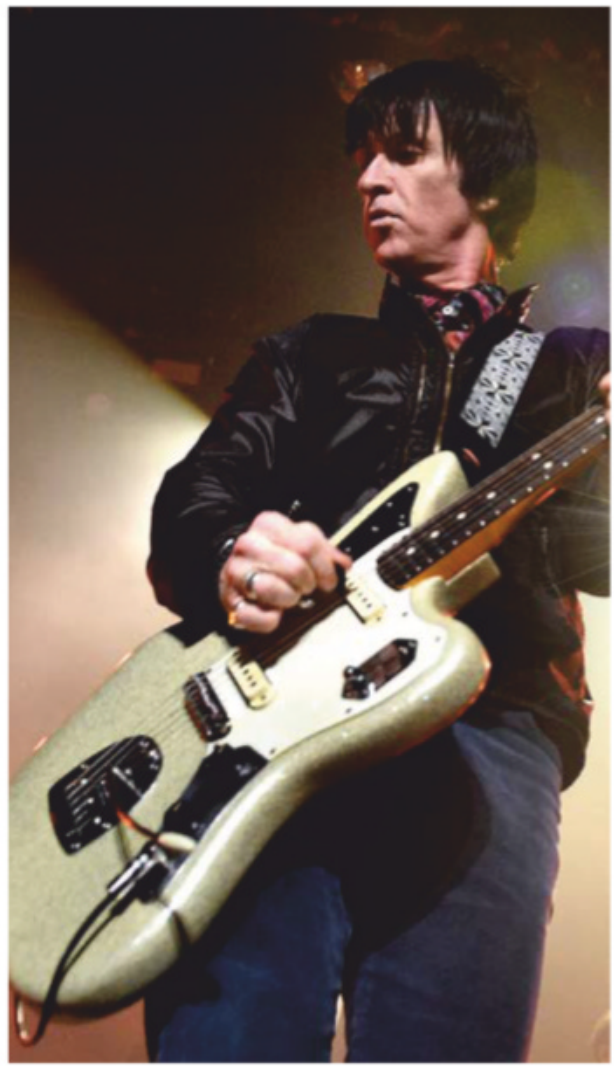
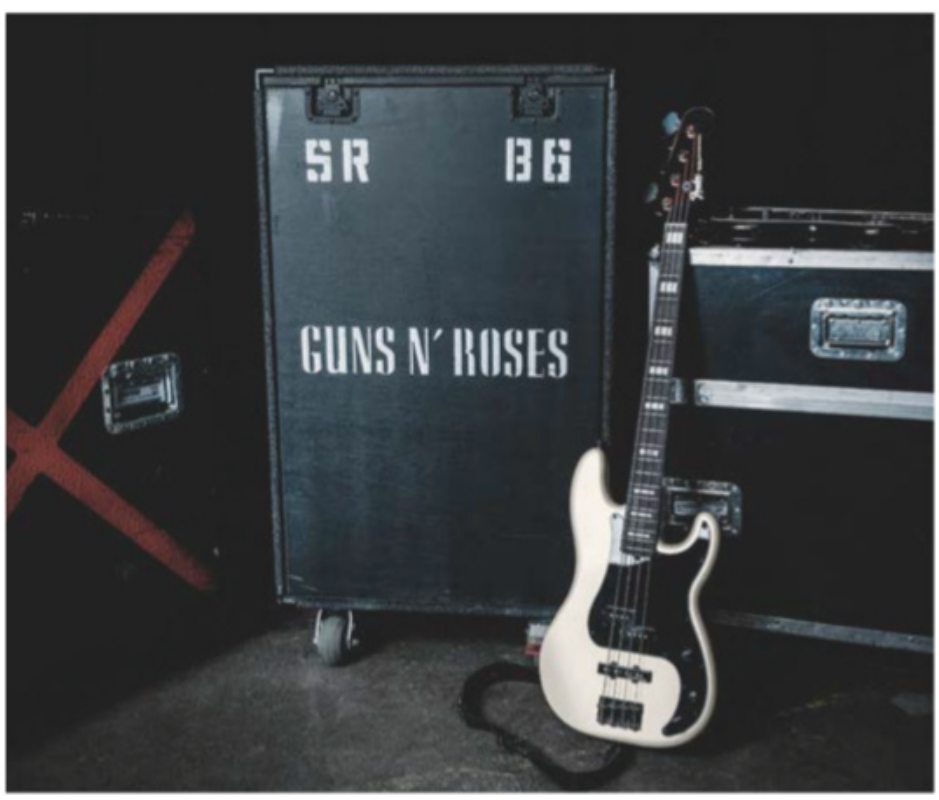
CONTENTS





ISSUE 369

CONTENTS

009 EDITOR'S LETTER
010 FRETBUZZ
012 SUBSCRIBE
014 ONES TO WATCH: LAURA STEVENSON
017 THE PLAYLIST
018 WIN: A MARSHALL DSL20CR
020 GUITAR.COM MASTERCLASS REPORT: MARTIN MILLER AND TOM QUAYLE
022 COVER FEATURE: SIGNED, SEALED, DELIVERED
030 OPINION: SIGNATURE GUITARS
036 THE GUITAR INTERVIEW: SLASH
044 INTERVIEW: DUFF MCKAGAN
048 INTERVIEW: TOM MISCH
056 THE MONEY SHOT: GRETSCH G6120T LIMITED EDITION '59 NASHVILLE SINGLE-CUT
058 VINTAGE BENCH TEST: 1953 GIBSON ES-295
066 THE COLLECTION: JAY EDEMA AND DAVID MCARTHUR
078 INDUSTRY INSIDER: ABERNETHY GUITARS
080 SHOP TALK: MIKE ZAITE
086 THE RUNDOWN: SIGNATURE PEDALS
090 REVIEW: SHEERAN BY LOWDEN W02 & S04
096 REVIEW: STERLING BY MUSIC MAN ST. VINCENT HH
100 REVIEW: GRETSCH G6659TFM PLAYERS EDITION BROADKASTER JR
104 REVIEW: ORANGE TREMLORD
108 REVIEW: BLACKSTAR AMPLIFICATION HT-1R MKII & HT-5R MKII COMBOS
112 REVIEW: RIFT AMPLIFICATION AYNSLEY LISTER SIGNATURE
118 REVIEW: AUDIENT SONO
122 REVIEW: WALRUS AUDIO MONUMENT V2 HARMONIC TAP TREMOLO
124 REVIEW: KEELEY ELECTRONICS SYNTH-1
127 DO IT YOURSELF: HOW TO INSTALL A BIGSBY ON A GIBSON ES-335
136 ESSENTIAL BLUES LESSONS
140 CHORD CLINIC: HOW TO PLAY JOHNNY MARR-STYLE CHORDS PART ONE
146 TALKBOX: ROB CHAPMAN

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EDITOR'S LETTER

WHERE DO I SIGN?

Welcome to The Signature Issue of *Guitar Magazine*, in which we explore the phenomenon of artist-signature instruments and more recent variations on the theme, with YouTubers getting in on the act and stars of the magnitude of Ed Sheeran launching a whole range of products emblazoned with their name.

As well as reviewing a pair of new Sheeran by Lowden acoustics and checking out the latest affordable iteration of St. Vincent's signature model courtesy of Sterling by Music Man, we also find out about the five years of painstaking R&D behind British blues guitarist Aynsley Lister's new Rift signature amp. If you've ever wondered exactly how much blood, sweat and solder goes into the process of developing a bespoke amplifier to an artist's specifications, head to p112 to read our review and hear from the amp-designer and musician at the heart of this collaboration.

Conversations about signature guitars inevitably lead to the question: 'What would your signature guitar be?'. Although my teenage dreams of rock stardom and endorsement deals have faded somewhat in recent years, in the highly unlikely event that I was ever offered the opportunity to design a signature instrument from the ground up, it would be a tough choice.

Give me an ES-335 with a Bigsby, a fat neck profile and a nice set of PAF-style humbuckers and I'm happy. Or a hollowbody with P-90s. Or a Gretsch with Filter'Trons. Or a vintage-style Strat… the list goes on. If anything, spring reverb, old-school tremolo and a whammy bar are more important to what I think of as 'my sound' than the guitar itself. Then again, I'm not exactly playing polyrhythmic mathcore, and it would take a massive headstock to accommodate such a long surname…

All that said, I'm sure that you have some great ideas when it comes to fantasy signature guitars. Whether it's an offset double-neck with a B-Bender and a built-in Fuzz Factory, or a Strat in the same colour as a 1982 Ford Cortina, please get in touch via email or on our social channels and let us know what your dream signature guitar would be. Until next time…

Chris Vinnicombe
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FEEDBACK

Your letters and observations on the world of guitar

Join the conversation Email us at editors@guitar.com

ACOUSTA-TONIC?

Dear *Guitar Magazine*, I was interested to read within these hallowed pages that Fender is having another stab at the electric/acoustic hybrid. This has always been a format that delivered far less than it promised. Yet it has always been a beguiling prospect on paper and so I've owned two of their previous attempts with mixed results.

The first was a plastic-backed and wood-fronted Telecoustic, made in China, with the earlier examples having a piezo pickup only. A later model would look somewhat like its new incarnation with a single-coil in the neck position. It was a relatively cheap and cheerful instrument that, with time, tended to crack around the neck pocket. It must have been an 80s obsession, as Kramer would release an almost identical instrument that proved no more popular than the Fender.

I also bought the Acoustasonic Telecaster, which was a much better-made Mexican guitar. Initially, I thought it was the answer to all my prayers, but in use, I found it a jack of all trades but master of none. The controls that balanced the levels were too fiddly for live use and in any case, it was very hard to get a satisfactory sound in either or both guises.

So, it would seem with each incarnation the build quality and price increases – and your reports on its prowess are very, very tempting. It all leaves me feeling rather like someone who has had two bad relationships who is reluctant to chance his heart again. I've been hurt twice! Will it be third time lucky?

DAVID SIDDON, CAMBRIDGE

Our experiences with the new American Acoustasonic certainly lead us to believe that this is a very different beast to the earlier models you mention, David. Everyone at *Guitar.com* who has played one has come away hugely impressed with its playability, tones and general worth as a music-making tool. We'd definitely recommend auditioning one – after all, if Jack White likes the concept enough to get a Custom Shop version made, Fender must be on to something!

OFFSET THE MARK

As the proud owner of a 1962 Jazzmaster (thanks to the best wife ever), I grabbed your Offset Issue with haste and loved it, but I hate to be the guy who points out that the 1950s Fender Duo-Sonic and Firebird aren't offset guitars…

MARC POOLE, VIA EMAIL

This was a hot topic in the *Guitar.com* offices when we were putting The Offset Issue together, Marc. Although the original 1950s Duo-Sonic and reverse-body Firebird have near-symmetrical waists, the latter's general asymmetry and the former's 1964 shift to a Mustang outline mean that we're prepared to invite them to the party!

FROM SOCIAL MEDIA

"The Fender Sixty-Six is alright, but let's see an Arrow, a Marauder or a Maverick – these are the oddities Fender should be whipping out! Don't get me wrong, it's good to see Fender doing something slightly left of field, but there are more interesting models in Fender's past."

JACK ASHWORTH, VIA FACEBOOK

"I'm excited about the Sheeran by Lowden guitars. I don't believe that George Lowden would release a bad instrument. And I'm confident this is one of the major reasons they are being built in Ireland. Quality control!"

BILL NEALE, VIA FACEBOOK

"I really hope Epiphone re-release Gary Clark Jr's 'Blak & Blu' Casino. Such a cool guitar!"

RYAN HUGHES, VIA INSTAGRAM

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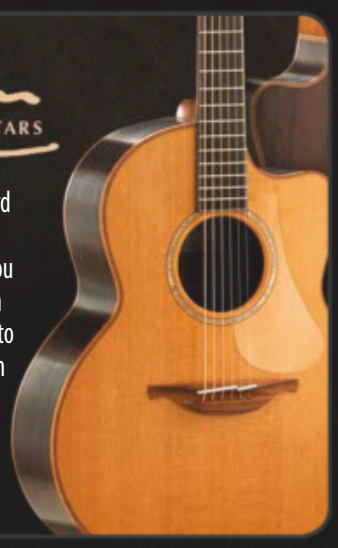

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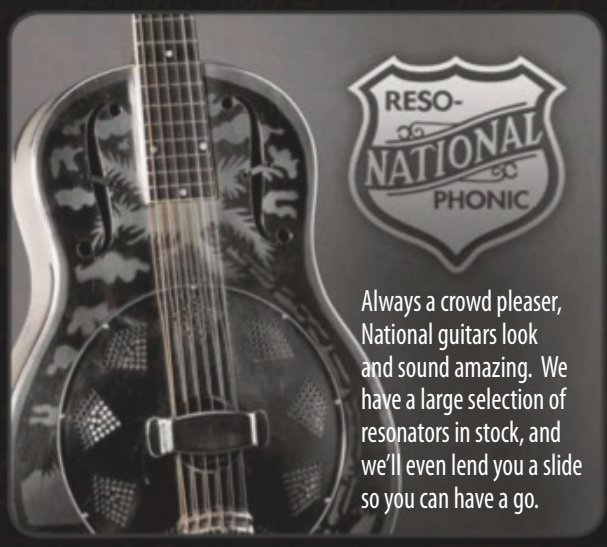

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SIGMA EST.1970

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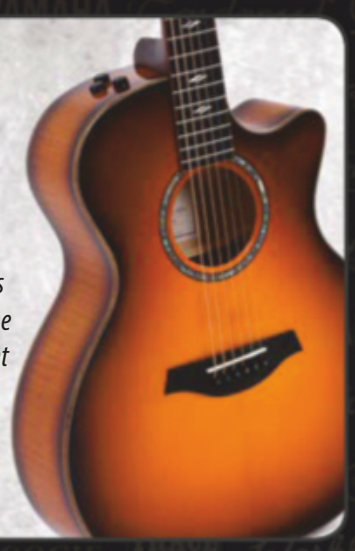

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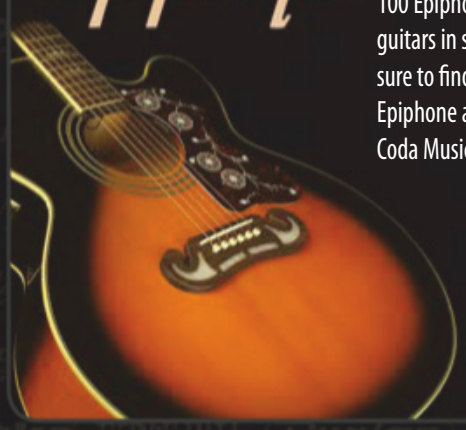

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Fender

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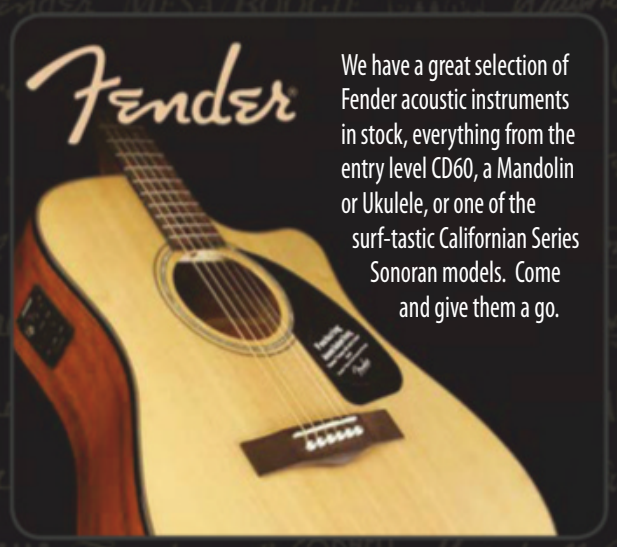

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“I STAY WITHIN SIMPLE PARAMETERS AND UNCONSCIOUSLY PLAY A PATTERN, THAT’S HOW I FINGER-PICK. IT’S NEVER SUPER INTENTIONAL, UNLESS THERE’S A MELODY LINE I HAVE TO PRACTISE”

ONES TO WATCH

LAURA STEVENSON @LAURASTEVENSON

INTERVIEW HUW BAINES **PHOTOGRAPHY** RACHEL BRENNECKE

Laura Stevenson's LP *The Big Freeze* is a powerful statement from one of America's most underrated singer-songwriters. She tells us about her love of Telecasters, her picking style and how guitar literally touches a nerve…

When did you first pick up a guitar?
"I used to play my dad's – a Martin from, maybe, the 50s. It had a giant hole in the side because his brother threw a shoe at him when he was little. He took it to the factory in Pennsylvania and they were like: 'We could patch it, but it's going to change the sound quality and cost 'x' amount.' So he lived with it falling apart. It sounds really deep and resonant, and just gorgeous."

Does every song start out with you picking up a guitar?
"I don't write with people and I never really have a full understanding of instrumentation – I'll have an idea, but it'll be nebulous. Sometimes, the songs have an energy that needs more, but I can't hear the particulars until it starts to unfold."

What's your approach to fingerpicking?
"I'm not coordinated in terms of soloing or playing complicated chord structures.… I stay within simple parameters and unconsciously play a pattern, that's how I finger-pick. It's never super intentional, unless there's a melody line I have to practise. I'm constantly trying to figure out how to play things comfortably."

***The Big Freeze* is your most ornate album, is it the closest you've come to a distillation of your guitar and voice in tandem?**
"This record was about the performance of the songs. It needed high, high emotion. I really needed it to be just the song coming out. When I play guitar, I can feel the vibrations against my abdomen and that's part of it, you know what I mean? There's something called the vagus nerve that runs down your middle, and it helps calm you down if you stimulate it. I was talking to my therapist about how playing guitar and feeling it vibrating against my body really calms me and she was like: 'Oh, you're stimulating your vagus nerve.'

"I feel really comfortable, to the point where if I'm on a bed playing guitar, I will fall asleep. Having that, and not thinking about anything else other than playing and singing, was so important."

You've always played Telecasters…
"I saw this beautiful Tele, I played it and it was just perfect. It's the '72, so it's got a wider fingerboard more similar to an acoustic… I could finger-pick and it was responsive – I'm either really delicate or really forceful… there's no middle ground. The Tele's great for that. I have my gain pretty high on my DeVille, but when I'm fingerpicking, it's sparkly, pretty and clean. When I give it a little oomph, suddenly there's this huge sound. I've tried other guitars and they don't make sense for me."

***Value Inn* is a fascinating latticework of guitars. How did you assemble it?**
"It's two guitars and this insane bass. I think that's it. At the end of some phrases, there's a tripling of two different fingerpicking patterns. I was just playing along to myself and had no intention of having a second guitar, but it's supposed to sound like waves crashing and then that feeling of the last breath of a tide before it goes back out." G

***The Big Freeze* is out on Don Giovanni Records**

THE PLAYLIST

ALBUM SPOTLIGHT

ROYAL REPUBLIC CLUB MAJESTY

INTERVIEW SAM ROBERTS

The Swedish alt-rockers' guitarist Hannes Irengård talks us through five guitar highlights from album number four…

Malmö-based rock band Royal Republic's high-energy shows have made them a mainstay on the scene in mainland Europe. Their new album has been a journey of learning to embrace, rather than suppress, their unique tendencies along with their self-proclaimed 'nerdiness', which has inspired a major breakthrough in the band's creative output. We asked guitarist Hannes Irengård for his five guitar highlights from the band's forthcoming upcoming album.

FIREMAN & DANCER

"This tune has a riff which goes along with the other guitar playing and they just should not work together… but they do, creating this awesome rhythmical pattern. The main riff was played on a 12-string Rickenbacker; it's the guitar part from the demo. We re-recorded it for the actual recording sessions, but we ended up using the demo take because it sounded grittier.

"For this riff, I think we kind of drew influence from ourselves, because we've been trying out that riff in so many ways previously. I think we worked on it for two or three years!"

UNDER COVER

"This is not so much a guitar riff as it is something that could be played on trumpets and saxophones. It sounds like a horn section and that's cool; it's very rhythmical. It's played in octaves and I believe Adam [Grahn, singer] played the low octave on an Epiphone Casino, and I played the high octave on a '65 Strat which I borrowed from a friend. It reminds me of that Lenny Kravitz song *Always On The Run*, where Slash plays a solo."

FLOWER POWER MADNESS

"I think it sounds like Steve Lukather trying to come up with a Royal Republic riff – which is probably not going to happen! For a Royal Republic guitar riff, it's pretty slick; it's got this single-string pattern that sounds a bit like Lukather meets Ritchie Blackmore. It was played on a 30th Anniversary Gibson SG from '91, which I also borrowed. I don't own a lot of guitars myself, because I have friends that own a lot of guitars!"

BOOMERANG

"Here's another one of my favourites, because it sounds like a fucking dinosaur playing! It's the most stupid riff on the album, and stupid equals good in Royal Republic land. It's just barre chords. Super simple, no fancy stuff at all, but it works and it grooves. It was played by Adam on an Epiphone Casino – it's his main guitar, while mine is a Tele, although I didn't play my Tele at all on this album. Somehow, my Tele works fantastically live, but not so well in the studio. I don't know why that is."

CAN'T FIGHT THE DISCO

"This riff is barre chords all the way through, no fancy stuff here either, but what I like is how it sits with the bass and drums. The hi-hat goes along with the guitar and the bass is just doing its own thing, playing super straight. I don't know how to explain it in fancy musical terms, it just sits very well and it grooves like crazy. It was played on a Casino and a Strat, and they both play the exact same thing.

"Then there's the guitar solo, with this kickass guitar sound… I can't remember how that was recorded. It was probably through one of the amps that one of the producers built himself, because he's a really nerdy tech guy that builds a lot of his stuff himself."

***Club Majesty* is out 31 May on Nuclear Blast**

This month's essential tracks for guitar lovers…

THE NATIONAL
Light Years
Ahead of their eighth album *I Am Easy To Find*, here's an introspective, delicate single with heavy piano and Matt Berninger's trademark baritone.

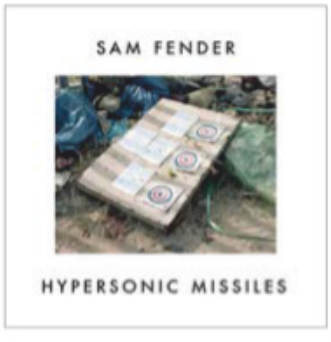
DUFF MCKAGAN
Tenderness
The GN'R bassist's new LP is detailed on p44. His new single, with balladeering piano and acoustic guitars, marks a new, tender era for the Rock And Roll Hall Of Famer.

TOM MISCH
Lost In Paris
Turn to p48 to read our interview with one of the UK's brightest young guitar players, before you listen to one of the grooviest tracks to come out of London in years.

KING GIZZARD & THE LIZARD WIZARD
Boogieman Sam
Fuzzed-out ZZ Top guitars open into swung drums and filtered harmonica, before Stu Mackenzie rambles a catchy, psych-rock chorus with harp and falsetto backing.

MAC DEMARCO
All Of Our Yesterdays
The hipster king returns with another laid-back treasure. Slide guitar and acoustic leads into a breezy single, perfect for lazy afternoons in the park with a beverage.

CAGE THE ELEPHANT AND BECK
Night Running
A team-up between the Kentucky rockers and the chameleonic multi-instrumentalist marks their forthcoming co-headline tour and melds reggae beats with scuzzy guitar.



SAM FENDER
Hypersonic Missiles
The Brit winner's latest single has poignant lyrics that reflect the mood of the times, while highlighting Springsteen influences with added saxophone and chorused guitars.

VAMPIRE WEEKEND
This Life
VW's fourth LP is nearly upon us, and Ezra Koenig's vision is in full flow. Tremolo baritone guitars join sweet leads and Danielle Haim's gorgeous backing vocals.

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A stage-ready 20-watt valve combo (with a handy toggle switch that allows you to drop the power to 10 watts), the DSL20CR packs a 12-inch Celestion Seventy 80 speaker and a tweaked EQ stack. This also includes presence and resonance to tune the DSL's formidable bass. There's also a speaker-emulated 3.5mm output for silent recording, an effects loop, and built-in digital reverb.

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Find out more about the DSL range at marshall.com, and to be in with a chance of winning this DSL20CR for yourself, simply visit the link below and answer the following question – guitar.com/news/competitions/marshall-dsl20cr

How many amps feature in Marshall's DSL range?
A 4 **B** 7 **C** 10

The closing date is 12.00am GMT, 1 June 2019. Good luck!

TERMS & CONDITIONS

The closing date is **12.00am GMT, 1 June 2019.** The editor's decision is final. The competition is open to UK residents only. When entering *Guitar Magazine* competitions, you will be given the option to receive details of future promotions from BandLab UK Limited and related third parties. If you do not want to receive this information, you can opt out. This giveaway is open to over 18s only. For full terms and conditions, please go to bnd.la/gm-ctos.

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MASTERS' VOICE

Back in April, guitar maestros Martin Miller and Tom Quayle were the stars of the second Guitar.com Masterclass event in Singapore, where they shared their expertise and experience for the packed crowd. Here's some of what we learned…

WORDS DANIEL ONG **PHOTOGRAPHY** LITING NG & NELLAMAE ANTOPINA

"Expect many notes." Those were the friendly words of caution from Tom Quayle at the onset of the Guitar.com Masterclass, held on 7 April in Singapore. Turns out, he wasn't kidding.

Together with Martin Miller, his partner for the evening, Quayle helmed an insightful session that swerved through playing techniques, improvisational tricks and of course plenty of duet arrangements. Chick Corea's *Spain*, Stevie Wonder's *Isn't She Lovely* and Pat Metheny's *Travels* were just a few of the tunes the virtuosos breezed through on their signature Ibanez guitars – Quayle on his TQM1 and Miller on his MM1.

And when it came to technique, Miller and Quayle had lots to demonstrate. The pair discussed the importance of chord tones over guitar scales when improvising. There is no 'right scale' to play in any particular key, Miller insisted. Rather, treating each chord in the progression as its own key makes for a more musically interesting and coherent solo or lead line.

Furthermore, Quayle's explanation of his legato and hybrid picking style wasn't only hugely informative, but also gave everyone in attendance a basic primer on hybrid fusion guitar.

Our thanks to Tom and Martin for keeping the 200-strong audience entertained and informed, and needless to say we're all excited to see what the next Guitar.com Masterclass will bring – stay tuned…

The Guitar.com Masterclass with Martin Miller and Tom Quayle was held in partnership with Ibanez and Swee Lee. Stay tuned to our Facebook and Instagram pages for updates on upcoming events

1 Tom Quayle opened the evening with his arrangement of Chick Corea's *Spain*

2 The Tom Quayle TQM1 Ibanez signature model on full display during the masterclass

3 Martin Miller tearing it up with his tasteful melodic phrases

4 Martin Miller kept his rig simple with just a wah pedal and an Atomic AmpliFIRE processing unit

5 Tom Quayle signing a headstock at the meet-and-greet session

SIGNED, SEALED, DELIVERED

What have John Mayer, Roy Smeck, Jimmy Page and Rob Chapman got in common? They've all played guitars with their name on them. Here, we chart the history of over a century of signature models, from guitars for vaudeville stars in grainy black and white, to YouTube phenoms with the machinery of a whole brand powering every streaming pixel…

WORDS TONY BACON

Who was the first guitarist awarded a signature-model electric? Before we get into that question, we ought to decide what we mean by a signature guitar. Sometimes known as an artist model, this is an instrument that bears the name of a well-known musician, usually alongside a popular brand name, offering some kind of connection to a guitar that this particular guitarist is known to play, manufactured as a production item and offered for sale to the public.

Which takes us back to that opening question. Who came first? There are 19th-century examples of what we might loosely call signature guitars, when some enterprising teachers had the commercial idea

ABOVE From the outset, guitar companies cottoned on to the fact that stars sell guitars – and none have proved more popular or enduring than that of Les Paul, whose first signature model debuted in 1952

of buying in guitars, signing the labels, and selling them on to eager pupils who wanted an affordable axe with a hint of the teacher's magic.

That idea continued with Martin's 1913 model for Vahdah Olcott-Bickford, a Hollywood-based teacher, and others since, always with the aim of having something ready when a pupil asks the inevitable "What shall I buy?"question.

More commonly, though, a signature guitar is named for a famous player. There were more early acoustic instruments that qualify as trailblazers, notably the Gibson Nick Lucas flattop, introduced in 1927. Nick was known as the Singing Troubadour and became a big star with catchy hits such as his signature tune *Tip-Toe Through The Tulips With Me* (almost as bonkers as the 60s cover by Tiny Tim). Nick cut some weightier items, too, such as *Teasing The Frets* – and despite the award of Gibson's signature model, Nick mainly played his favoured L-1 flat-top.

Other signature models from this era included several Harmony Roy Smeck models, with guitars starting in 1928, the Selmer Eddie Freeman tenor (1933), and Gibson's Roy Smeck Radio Grande and Stage Deluxe flattops (1934).

SIGN OF THE TIMES

For the electric signature guitar, however, the big event was the launch of the Gibson Les Paul Model in 1952. Again, there were a handful of earlier examples, but they made little impact. Among them was the Harmony-made Rickenbacker Ken Roberts electric flat-top (1935), an Epiphone Anthony Rocco lap-steel (1936) and a couple of Gibson-made Recording King lap-steels for the tireless Roy Smeck (1938/39). In case you're wondering, Roy was a widely popular star from the vaudeville days who played ukulele, banjo, steel and guitar. He seems to have endorsed more or less every instrument anyone ever showed him.

Anyway, into the early 50s and Gibson noticed that the innovative solidbody electrics which the upstart Leo Fender made over in California were becoming popular. Gibson had to compete, decided to make its own electric solidbody and bossman Ted McCarty made a signature deal with Les Paul, the best-known guitarist in America. Les had modified several guitars to try to get closer to the kind of electric instrument he wanted and the tones he was looking for. More importantly for Gibson, he was famous, scoring a US No. 1 smash with Mary Ford in 1951 with the multi-vocal, multi-guitar *How High The Moon*.

Gibson's in-house team designed the new Les Paul Model, apart from Les's trapeze tailpiece, which was soon replaced. This approach remained the model for many of the signature electrics that followed on the heels of the Gibson, with guitar makers slapping

ABOVE Signature sounds, from l to r: Guild's Duane Eddy 400 first released in 1963; a Gretsch 6123 Monkees model from 1967; and Fender's Eric Clapton Signature Stratocaster, first released in 1988

a famous name on an instrument it either already made or devised itself. It was a step beyond the 50s ads and catalogues that featured a well-known player with a particular guitar: Laurindo Almeida and a Vega E-300, for example; or Jimmy Bryant and a Broadcaster, or Mary Osborne and a White Falcon.

Other big brands sought their own Les Paul as the 50s progressed. An early one was the Framus 5/120 Billy Lorento (aka Bill Lawrence) archtop, introduced in 1953. Höfner's UK agent Selmer opted for a combined effort and in 1957 introduced the Committee, designed in collaboration with six British pro guitarists: Frank Deniz, Ike Isaacs, Jack Llewellyn, Freddie Phillips, Roy Plummer, and Bert Weedon. Kay introduced a trio of Barney Kessel models in '57, although the company removed the 'Barney Kessel' pickguards later when he moved to Gibson.

THE CHET SET

Despite the control exercised by the guitar companies, it was exciting to be honoured with a signature model – a dash of extra promo never did a guitarist any harm. Gretsch launched its Chet Atkins 6120 and semi-solid 6121 in 1955 and the Country Gentleman and Tennessean three years later, and Chet told me 40 years later how much it meant to have a signature model.

"I was thrilled to have my name on a guitar," he said, "like Les Paul had his name on the Gibson. I was so thrilled by that – and I don't know why. Now it wouldn't mean that much to me. At the time I was fired up with ambition and I was so anxious to be known all over the world and be known as a great guitarist, and that was one brick in the edifice that would help that happen."

In later decades, the idea of the signature electric blossomed as more models hit the shops, tempting players who wondered if some of their hero's fairy dust might be lurking under the frets or inside the pickups of the instrument that bore the star's name.

In the 60s, as rock and pop exploded, dozens of new signature models appeared, and some were aimed at the popularity of a band rather than an individual musician, such as the Mosrite Ventures (1963), the Gretsch Monkees (1966), or the Guyatone Sharp 5 (1967).

Through the 60s and 70s the signature idea took root in many a maker's catalogue, and often the endorser began to have a more significant input to the design of his model. Burns had its (Hank) Marvin solidbody, first seen in 1964 and Epiphone introduced a couple of (Al) Caiola multi-control models in 1963, along with two oval-soundhole Howard Roberts sigs in '64. Danelectro's Bellzouki 12-string (1962) just about qualifies for inclusion here as it was named for Vinnie Bell, and Framus made a couple of Attila Zoller archtops (1960) and a Jan Akkerman semi (1974).

Gibson offered a trio of jazz boxes named for Tal Farlow (1962), Barney Kessel (two versions, 1961), and Johnny Smith (two versions, 1961/62), as well as a couple of Trini Lopez models (a semi

NOW THERE'S A TREND FOR ARTISTS AND YOUTUBE PERSONALITIES TO BECOME THE BRAND, NOT JUST A SIGNATURE ON ANOTHER GUITAR-MAKER'S INSTRUMENT

ABOVE PRS's signature Silver Sky was based on close collaboration with John Mayer and juxtaposes elements of the star's favourite vintage guitars with features from the company's core models

and a hollowbody, 1964), and various Howard Roberts models (1970/76/79). Gretsch introduced the (George) Van Eps seven-string in 1968 and the hollowbody Super Chet (Atkins) in 1972.

Guild made its thinline Duane Eddy in two versions (1962/63), plus the similar Bert Weedon (1963) and a couple of George Barnes archtops (1962/63), while Ibanez offered two George Benson archtops (1977) and a Paul Stanley solidbody (1978).

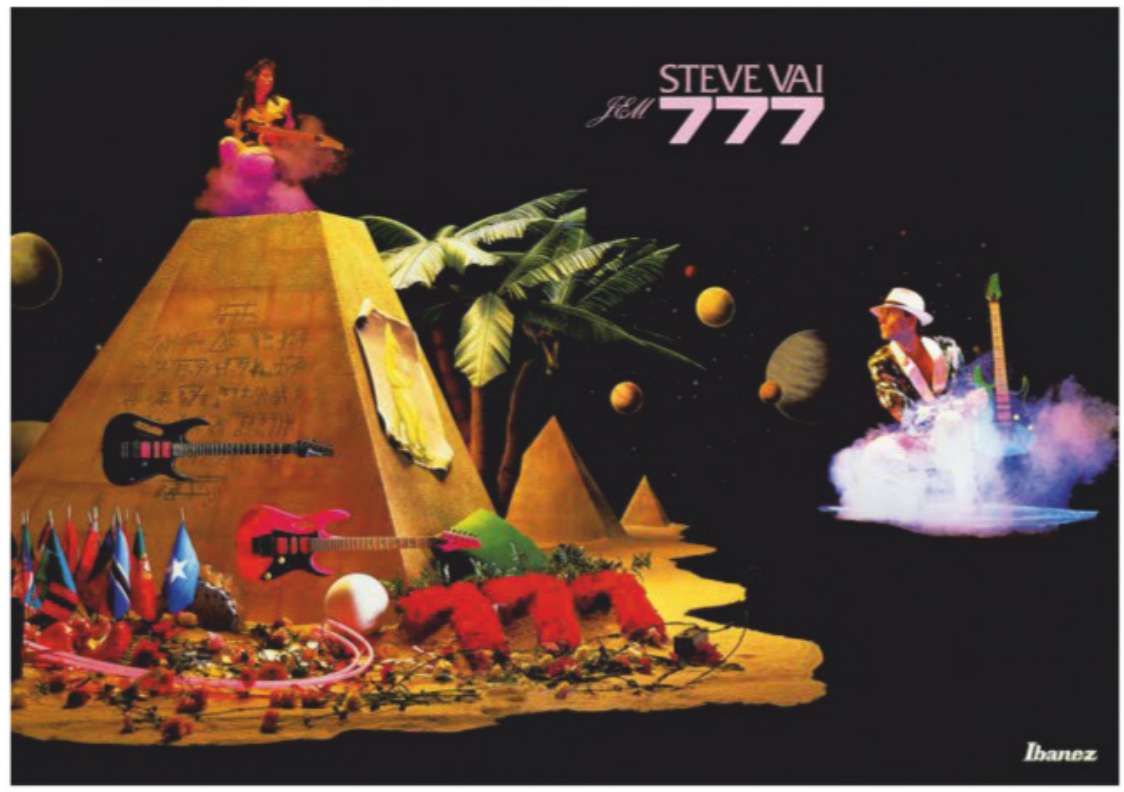
MONKEY MAGIC

You probably spotted an omission from that 60s/70s inventory, and that's because the first Fender signature electrics didn't appear until 1988. The Eric Clapton Stratocaster had Lace Sensors, a midrange-boosting active circuit, and a blocked-off vintage-style vibrato, while the Yngwie Malmsteen Stratocaster had a scalloped fingerboard, DiMarzios at the neck and bridge, plus a central Fender pickup, a brass nut and old-style narrow headstock and two-pivot vibrato.

In 1995, the original signature electric, Gibson's Les Paul, was for the first time issued as a signature-signature electric. The Gibson Jimmy Page Les Paul lasted in the line for about four years and accommodated Jimmy's request for an unusual neck shape and fret height. Visually, it was a basic Standard with a lightly figured top, gold-plated hardware, and Pagey's which-way-is-up autograph logo on the pickguard. More accurate (and desirable) repros of Jimmy's hallowed Bursts would follow in the 2000s.

How about a non-signature signature? Steve Vai's JEM models for Ibanez, introduced as the JEM777LG in 1987, did not have his name anywhere on the guitar (unless you count his hand-signed autograph on that initial limited-edition run), but his involvement was widely promoted and understood. The JEM had all the hallmarks of a guitar designed for Vai-flavoured extreme rock and it was one of the highlights of the 80s trend for 'superstrats'.

Ibanez's masterstroke was to remove some of the JEM's wilder excesses and apply most of the new design benefits to its revised RG line, notably the new RG550 of 1987 and its popular siblings.



TOP Steve Vai's Ibanez JEM range proved to be a highlight of the 'superstrat' era of guitar designs

ABOVE Rob Chapman's inclusive, collaborative design process has been at the heart of a range of signature products

"I had this instinct that the JEM's features were probably going to be used by other companies," Steve tells me, "because some of them are pretty practical ideas, you know? So I wanted to put one thing into this guitar that I knew no one would do, because it would be too outrageous. So I put the Monkey Grip 'handle' in it. I knew no one else would do this: it's a very identifiable feature. How else can you really create an identifiable instrument these days? Usually, if you try to do that, it perverts the guitar – it looks like you're trying too hard."

THE MODERN AGE

One of the most recent signature-signature models, the PRS Silver Sky, had Paul Reed Smith's signature as usual on the headstock and co-designer John Mayer's squiggle on the neckplate. This 2018 model certainly got noticed, because it came on very much like a PRS Stratocaster. And despite the predictable noise online about its Fender-centric design and what some saw as a lack of originality, it sold well.

And talking of online, now there's a trend for artists and YouTube personalities to become the brand, not just a signature on another guitar-maker's instrument. Tosin Abasi has taken this path with his Abasi Concepts, and so has Zakk Wylde with Wylde Audio. Maybe it's symptomatic of the way social media can allow artists to communicate directly with fans, diminishing for some the need for gatekeepers such as guitar companies and record labels.

Perhaps the idea of the artist brand started with Eddie Van Halen? He'd naturally attracted his fair share of signature guitars, including models for Music Man in 1991, Peavey in '96, and Charvel in '04. But in 2007, Eddie teamed up with Fender to create his own EVH brand, which continues to offer models such as the iconic Striped Series and Frankenstein Replica Guitar.

Rob Chapman set up Chapman Guitars in 2009. The boss at wholesaler and distributor Barnes & Mullins was intrigued when many of the audience at one of Rob's demo gigs for Faith acoustics clamoured for a signed picture from Rob. "You're not famous," said the perplexed boss. "How come they know who you are?" Rob explained how his fame had grown through online videos, that some of his YouTube spots attracted 10,000 views, a huge number back then.

The boss offered Rob a signature model and Rob posted a video about the idea, asking for comments on the sort of guitar his fans wanted.

"I didn't really think anything of it," he tells me from his base in Brighton, "but I'd tripped over and invented collaborative design in guitar. It became a huge deal online, and I did three voting polls of different kinds of specifications." Barnes & Mullins generously suggested that Rob might be better off launching his own brand, and so Chapman Guitars and its first instrument, the ML1, was born.

Today, Chapman offers a line of collaboratively designed models made in Britain, Indonesia, and Korea; crucially, the firm sells direct to its dealers, avoiding the overheads of a distribution operation. "Because I have fans who listen to my music and see me on tour, they want to buy my guitar," Rob continues. "I thought, okay, people want to buy a Rob Chapman signature guitar and I own a guitar brand. So I'll make a Rob Chapman signature guitar from Chapman Guitars. That's the Ghost Fret, one of our most popular-selling models for months. But people tend to view a signature guitar as a badge of honour given to you by someone else – and here I am making myself a signature guitar. Really, though, we make whatever people ask us to make."

Rob says he feels blessed when he turns up to a gig with a Chapman Ghost Fret guitar he designed and brought to market. Everything he has in his hands is his own choice. "I plug that into some Snake Oil pedals that I've designed, and a Victory RD1 amp, a signature model that was given to me. So literally my entire rig, from the fingertips to the ears, is designed or owned or run by me. And then when you get the sound you really, really want, well… it's an amazing feeling."

THRILLING IN THE NAME OF...

Just a handful of signature six-string electrics that have captured the imagination over the past few years…

1 FENDER EOB SUSTAINER STRATOCASTER

Ed O'Brien was keen to call this a "co-build" as opposed to a signature model, but with a built-in Fernandes Sustainer pickup in the neck and a Duncan JB Jr humbucker in the bridge, it's got the Radiohead man's fingerprints all over it.

2 MUSIC MAN ST. VINCENT

One of the most interesting and successful signature models in recent year's, Annie Clark's angular instrument is a retrofuturist dream. Apparently designed to fit more comfortably to the female form, its ergonomics are a boon for all players.. Check out the new Sterling version on p96.

3 FENDER ALBERT HAMMOND JR STRATOCASTER

The Strokes man's signature is closely modelled on his own 1985 reissue of a '72 Stratocaster, but the really interesting part is the switching. Identical to Hammond's personal Strat, positions one and three are reversed, while four has neck and bridge in tandem.

4 EPIPHONE GARY CLARK JR BLAK & BLU CASINO

The US bluesman became one of the most recognisable current users of Epiphone's famous hollowbody when he burst onto the scene in 2010, and when his debut album, *Blak & Blu* arrived in 2012, this appropriately hued, USA-pickup sporting signature accompanied it.

5 GIBSON MEMPHIS DAVE GROHL ES-335

The Foo Fighters main man has long had a love of the Trini Lopez model, and so it's no surprise that his signature 335 uses the same diamond soundholes and Firebird-style headstock, plus two gorgeous finishes in Pelham Blue and Gold Metallic.

MANSON MB-1

6 Matt Bellamy's long association with Manson Guitar Works goes right back to his early days with Muse, and he's had a variety of signature instruments made for him by the Devon luthier. The most famous of them all is perhaps this T-style MB-1, complete with twin humbuckers and built-in MIDI controller.

MUSIC MAN MAJESTY

7 John Petrucci is one of Music Man's most enduring artists, and he has a whole collection of signature models with the brand: the newest and most unique of which is the Majesty model, which features a through-neck construction and Petrucci's own floating tremolo.

FENDER JIMMY PAGE TELECASTER

8 This USA-made reproduction of Page's famous 'Dragon' Telecaster brings some of the iconic feel and vibe of the extremely limited Custom Shop version at a more realistic price-point. With the same iconic paintjob, it's a ticket to classic-rock nirvana.

FENDER JOHNNY MARR JAGUAR

9 The Smiths man has come to love Jaguars in recent years, and his signature is widely hailed for fixing many of the short-scale offset's eccentricities. The Marr model is equipped with Mustang bridge saddles, custom Bare Knuckle pickups and simplified switching.

IBANEZ FIREMAN

10 Paul Gilbert has played a variety of shred-tastic Ibanez guitars over his three-decade-plus association with the brand, but the Fireman – essentially a flipped version of the company's 70s Iceman design – is perhaps the most fun and eye-catching.

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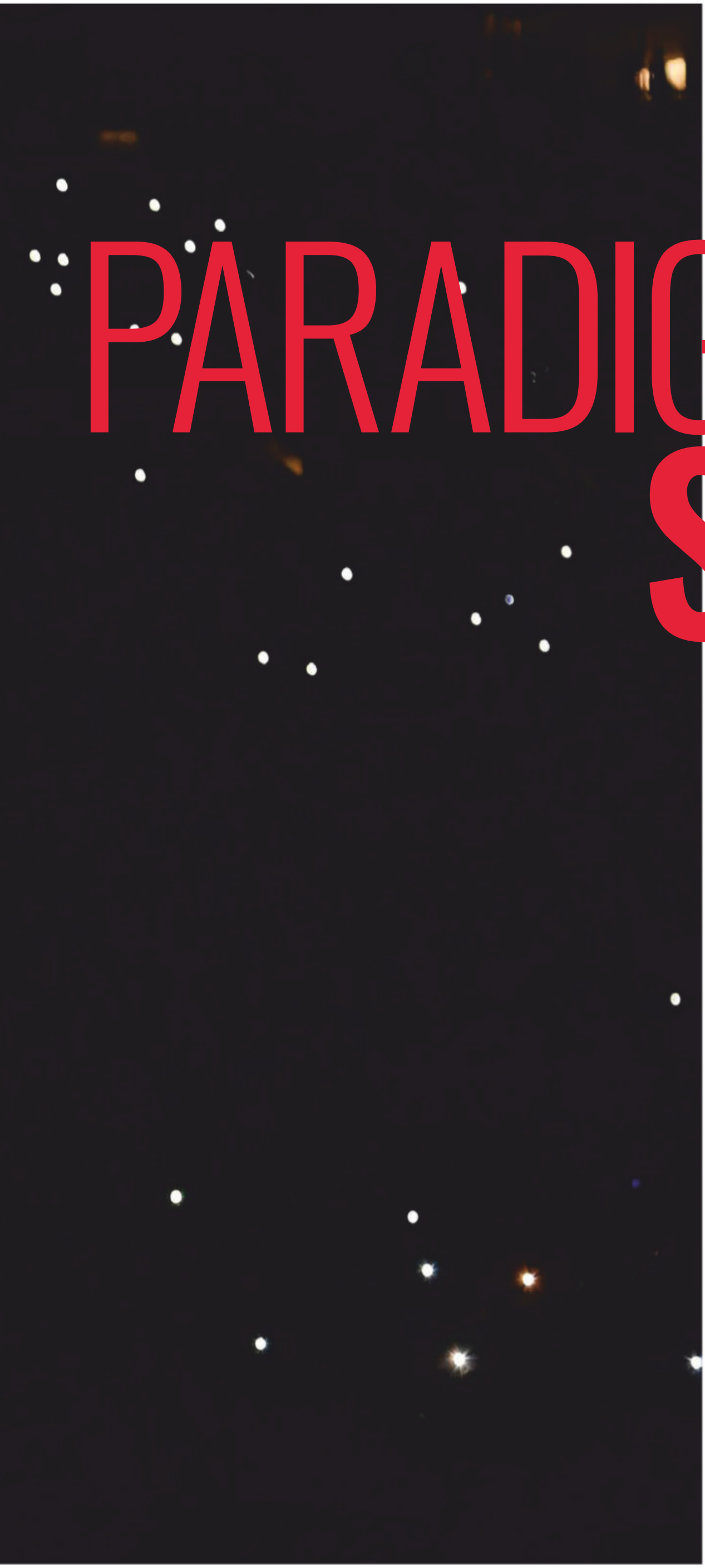


PARADIGM SHIFT

Signature guitars are a familiar concept, but could Ed Sheeran's new guitar brand usher in a new era for the industry?

WORDS JOSH GARDNER

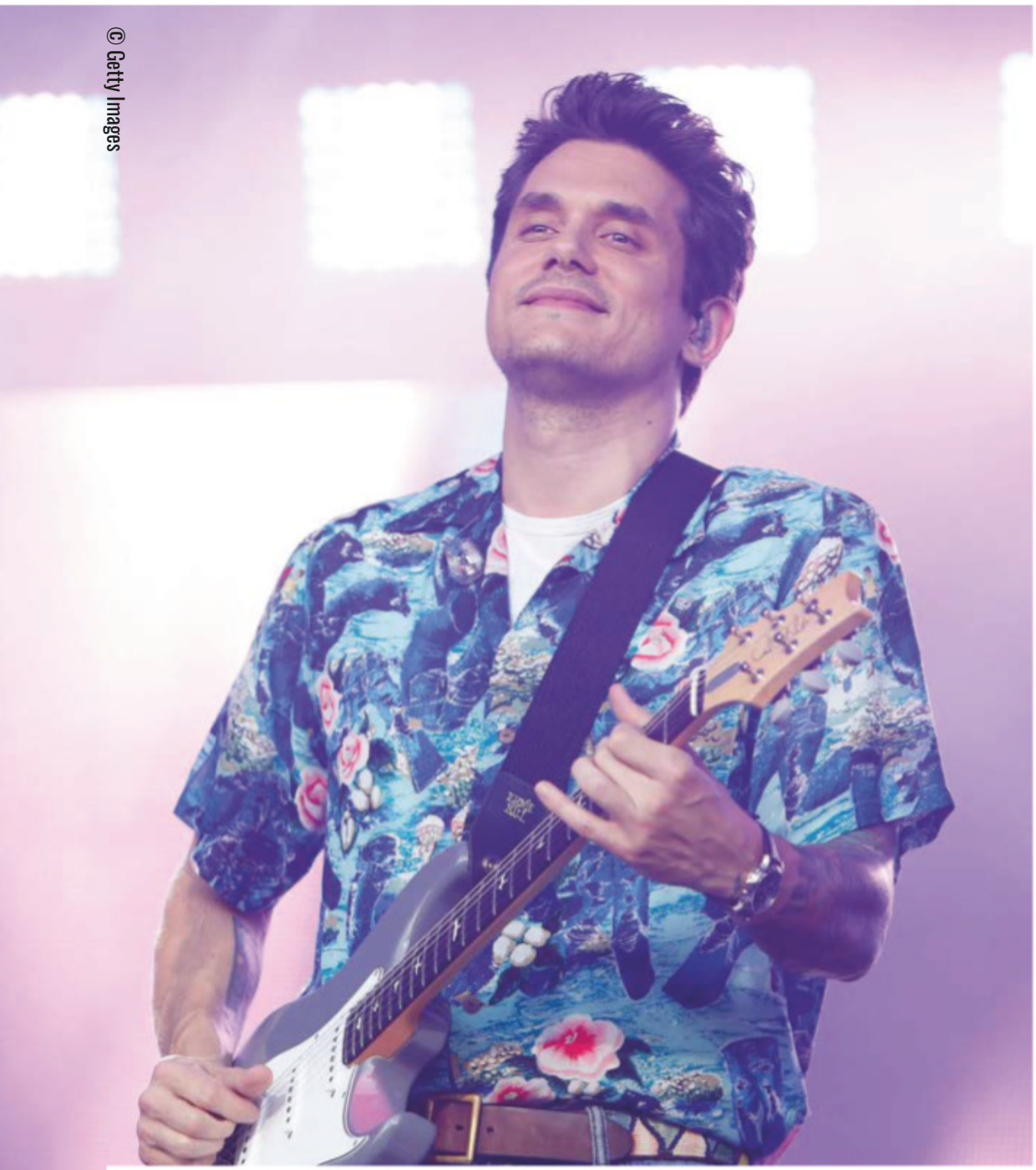
If you're going to start a revolution, the plush surroundings of the Sheraton Park Hotel in Anaheim, California might not be the most obvious place to do it. Yet that's exactly what Lowden Guitars did on the eve of NAMM 2019, when the company gathered a small group of journalists and retailers in the hotel's garden and brought out the most famous guitarist on the planet.

For those of us who were at the Sheraton that evening, the announcement of Sheeran by Lowden instantly felt seismic – something bigger and more interesting than the standard artist collaboration.

Of course, artist endorsements are nothing new in the world of guitar – just ask Roy Smeck, Buck Owens or the most famous guitar endorsee of them all, Les Paul – but the implications of this felt different, and hugely significant for the wider guitar industry. This was confirmed by the presence of CNN at the public press conference announcing the brand the following day – global news outlets don't tend to show up at guitar launches, after all. But why should this be so different to one of the countless signature products debuted at NAMM over the years?

Well, the answer is twofold. Firstly, Ed Sheeran was the biggest-selling artist in the world in 2018 and is currently the most famous guitarist on the planet. Secondly, he's not just putting his name on a guitar, he's starting a business.

You need only load up your preferred social-media platform, or indeed walk into any department store, and you'll see that we live in an age where celebrities are no longer just endorsing products.



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CREATING SHEERAN BY LOWDEN GIVES ED SOMETHING MORE THAN A NAME ON A HEADSTOCK, IT GIVES HIM THE FREEDOM TO CREATE SOMETHING THAT'S TRULY HIS

ABOVE The pre-launch marketing for John Mayer's PRS Silver Sky signature guitar took cues from brands in the fashion world

Instead, they're creating them themselves, marketing them themselves and generally raising the profile of their products to dizzy heights in very short order.

This isn't a totally new concept, of course. The Jordan sub-brand has become a $3-billion-dollar-a-year business for Nike, while Beats Audio made Dre hip-hop's first billionaire when he and Jimmy Iovine sold the company to Apple. What's different in 2019 is the speed and force with which celebrities can build brands out of nothing.

Just look at Kylie Jenner. The youngest member of the Kardashian brood has parlayed her global celebrity and giant social-media following into becoming the world's youngest self-made billionaire at the age of just 21 – primarily on the back of her barely five-year-old Kylie Cosmetics range, which was sold exclusively through the Ulta Beauty chain.

And in the music world, Beyoncé's Ivy Park high-end activewear range, initially created with Topshop, has rapidly become a global phenomenon, Rihanna's Fenty brand has built a strong business focused on beauty and lingerie, while Kanye West's Yeezy brand is so powerful, even his recent erratic public behaviour hasn't dulled sneaker hounds' desire for his limited-edition Adidas kicks.

And that's why before the guitars had even hit the shelves, Sheeran by Lowden was already one of the most important acoustic-guitar brands in the world – because it instantly has the ability to reach an audience that traditional guitar brands can only dream of.

Take Lowden, for example. The brand currently has about 41,000 followers on Instagram, while Ed's former guitar partner Martin has around 450,000. Ed himself? A hair short of 28 million people. Now you can argue that the majority of those people might not be interested in guitars, but they're interested in Ed Sheeran – and if they also do happen to want a guitar, you can bet that a Sheeran By Lowden is going to be on their must-try list.

So that's the marketing justification then, but what's in it for Ed himself? He sold loads of his Martin signature models and no doubt would have continued to, so why up sticks from one of the 'big two' acoustic brands for a boutique luthier in Northern Ireland that makes fewer guitars in a year than Martin makes in a day?

Well, the most basic truth is that Ed clearly, evidently loves the brand – the genuine warmth and affection between Sheeran and George Lowden was palpable at the launch event

But there's more to it than that. Creating Sheeran by Lowden gives Ed something more than a name on a headstock, it gives him his name above the door. With that comes the control and freedom to create something that is truly his, and truly long-lasting.

It also enhances his credentials as a guitarist and musician. It'll be harder for people to dismiss him as 'just another pop star' now he's demonstrated his love for fine boutique guitars so much that he's started his own brand with one of the most respected names in the business.

And from Lowden's side the benefits are even more palpable – the association with Sheeran has huge and obvious benefits in terms of visibility and audience, but it also enables what is very much a family-oriented company to grow in a secure way.

George Lowden knows the risks associated with trying to mix it up with the big boys at the entry-level end of the acoustic market better than most, but in Sheeran by Lowden, he's come up with an innovative and secure platform on which to expand, building a state of the art factory in Northern Ireland and securing the legacy of his company and his brand long after he hangs up his fret file.

The Sheeran by Lowden venture is clearly the most visible and potentially important example of

18+

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guitarists taking full ownership of the instruments they play, but you don't have to look hard to see that the concept is catching on and giving players the freedom that they might not get were they simply doing signature models with big brands.

One notable example here is Tosin Abasi. The Animals As Leaders guitarist has worked with Ibanez in the past, but his new Abasi Guitars venture has seen him create – in the Larada – a guitar that is as unconventional and challenging as his music.

There's also Rob Chapman. The YouTube star might never have had a hit record in his life, but he's been savvy and smart enough to see that in the age of the social influencer, having a passionate following on social media can open doors that might otherwise be closed to him. Chapman Guitars' crowd-sourced guitar concept is extremely smart – getting fans involved and invested in a brand at the design stage is a surefire way to improve your chances of selling them, and the huge sales and rapid expansion of the range is testament to how well it's worked.

John Mayer is a different but hugely informative example of how even a more conventional signature product can be elevated by the involvement of an artist with the right kind of social-media marketing savvy. As anyone who's browsed his Instagram will be aware, Mayer is hugely embedded in the fashion world and the cutting-edge marketing therein. He's even been involved in that arena himself, via collaborative lines with Nike and most recently, Japanese streetwear brand Neighborhood.

It makes sense then, that when it came to releasing his signature PRS Silver Sky guitar in 2018, Mayer adopted the principles used by the likes of fashion brand Supreme to tease and hype the guitar in advance of its launch, which in turn led to an outpouring of opinion across the internet when the guitar finally dropped.

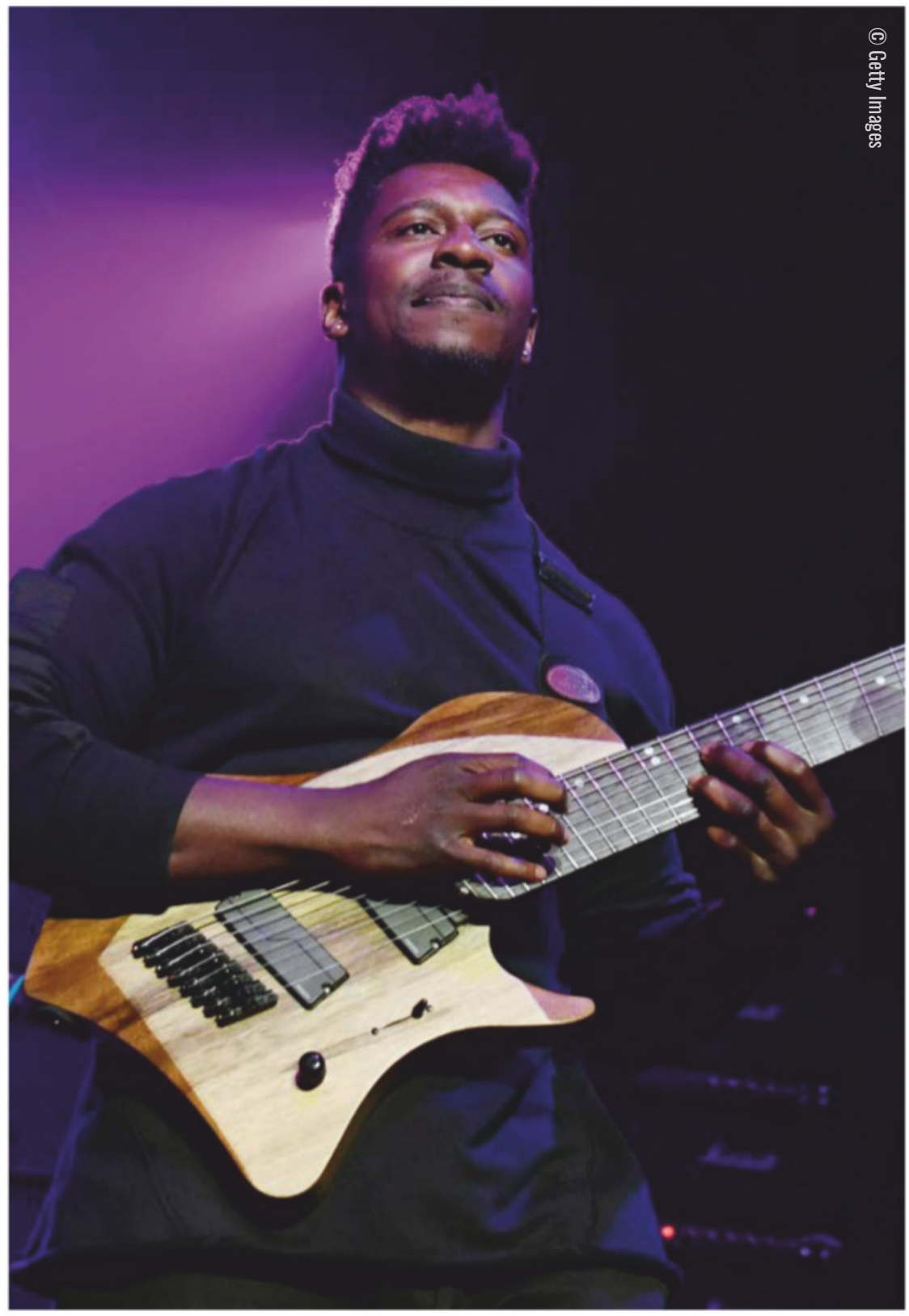
While the reaction to the instrument was by no means universally positive, the critical mass of hype and publicity that Mayer's carefully considered pre-launch campaign whipped up led to a demand that overwhelmed PRS's most optimistic expectations of how it would sell.

Creative partnerships aren't always fruitful, however, and show the importance of judging that meeting of artist and brand correctly. Remember the PR disaster that was the Gibson-made, Jimi Hendrix-branded S-type from 2009? The concept was so flawed that the project was canned within 24 hours of it being announced, such was the negative force of the backlash.

And more recently, Danish effects firm TC Electronic was burned when the internet caught wind of the Pussy Melter – the signature pedal of Steel Panther man Satchel – and quickly withdrew it after an understandable furore. Interestingly, Steel Panther's response was to release the pedal themselves… another example, although perhaps not the most positive one, of an artist being able to exert full control over their gear if they take personal ownership of it.

So what does all this mean for the future of guitar? Well, the likes of Sheeran, Abasi, Chapman and Mayer are not random outliers. Guitarists are starting to see their worth as brands, just as their counterparts in sports, entertainment and almost any other field have done. Inevitably, the result of that will be more and more examples of them wanting more than just a name on a headstock when it comes to the gear they play.

And while that probably won't have too much of an effect on the heritage brands we all know and love, it's certainly likely to make the guitar landscape a much more varied and pluralistic place – and that can't be a bad thing for anyone. **G**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BELOW Tosin Abasi plays his pioneering eight-string Larada 8 model live, and markets it through his Abasi Guitars company

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SLASH

THE GUITAR INTERVIEW

The last few years have been some of the most eventful in Slash's remarkable career. After decades of acrimony he finally took to the stage with Guns N' Roses again, the guitar company with which he's become synonymous went to the brink of oblivion and back – and finally, he closed in on the 10th anniversary of his solo project.

With so much to talk about, we caught up with the guitarist to find out how it felt to step back onstage with GN'R, why The Conspirators keeps him grounded, what went wrong at Gibson, his newfound love of P-90 pickups and how somehow, he's still a self-conscious guitar player…

WORDS JOSH GARDNER **PHOTOGRAPHY** ELEANOR JANE

Les Paul
Marshall

ABOVE, FACING PAGE Slash with Myles Kennedy And The Conspirators at the Eventim Apollo in Hammersmith, London in February 2019

Slash is in a good mood. "We've been having what I would consider one of the most fun European tours that we've ever had," the guitarist tells us, on a day off between tour dates with Myles Kennedy And The Conspirators in Milan and Toulouse. "It's been very well received and all the gigs have been sold out, so it's cool!"

Despite spending the last few years juggling his solo project with the small matter of the most hyped and successful rock 'n' roll reunion tour in history, he seems in a relaxed place, in no small part because of the balance his hectic schedule offers.

"Guns N' Roses is just this big epic thing," the 53-year-old explains. "The Conspirators is on a lower scale, which keeps you grounded for sure!"

Despite keeping him on the level, the demands of the highest-grossing tour of all time haven't given Slash much chance to spend time with his new solo album *Living The Dream* since it was released last year, something that he's finally getting a chance to rectify: "Y'know, you just get so used to flying by the seat of your pants, you just adapt quickly!" he says of his hectic schedule. "You go in, you get a quick rehearsal in and then you go out! And it starts to really come together during the course of the tour. The new songs are all very fun to play and very well received – any song is fun to play if people are familiar with it!"

CONSPIRACY OF HEARTS

If you've been following Slash's career since his 80s heyday, it might be surprising to note that it's nearly a decade since he kicked off the solo project that became Slash Featuring Myles Kennedy And The Conspirators. In that time, he's released four varied albums (three with The Conspirators), and discovered something that he hadn't truly found since he left Guns in the mid 90s – a home.

"I think when I first set out on this back in 2010, it was really a vehicle for me to be able to play most of the stuff that I'd been involved with – so it was Guns, Velvet, Snakepit… and stuff off my then-new solo record. But then when we got into *Apocalyptic Love* we began to establish a fanbase and it felt like it wasn't just a fluke thing or a one-shot deal, it was actually looking like it was going to continue on. And I think that's important, because people will gravitate towards something if they know you're serious."

The volume of work that he's built up as a solo artist is reflected in the makeup of his current tour setlist, but his 'other job' also played a big part in his desire to focus on his solo material with The Conspirators. "When I went to do the Guns tour, I got a lot of wanting to play those songs out of my system," Slash explains. "Y'know, I'm playing it with the guys I used to play it with. So when it came to touring on this record, we not only have an actual catalogue now, but also I don't need to play those other songs – there's no reason to play *Sweet Child O' Mine* in this band, y'know?"

BACK IN THE SADDLE

There's definitely one band that there *is* a reason to play *Sweet Child O' Mine* in, however, and since 2016, Slash has been taking the stage alongside Axl

Rose and Duff McKagan for the first time since his first stint with the band came to an end in 1994.

The 'Not In This Lifetime…' tour brought to an end one of the most acrimonious splits in the history of rock and pulled in over half a billion dollars in its two-year run, making it the second-highest grossing tour in history. Fans clearly loved it, then, but we're curious as to what it felt like for the man himself to step back out on stage with Guns N' Roses for the first time in over two decades…

"Oh man, it was overwhelming – it was so cool," Slash enthuses. "Because it was a long time – we're talking more than 20 years from the last show in 1994… it was 22 years since the last time we'd played together. And obviously I'd played with Duff [since then] but there's a certain dynamic in the three of us together. It was awesome, and it's a really great experience."

After so long doing his own thing, we couldn't help but wonder if Slash found the reality of being back in Guns different to being in The Conspirators, but in truth, Slash remains Slash no matter what band he's in… "Actually, I don't do very much different in either band," he confirms. "Axl of course is the focus point of Guns, and I just sort of run around doing my thing! And in that respect, it's very similar with the Conspirators, in that I leave it up to Myles to be the front guy. I don't talk to the audience or anything, Again, I just run around doing my own thing! But I've been doing that for almost 10 years now, so I've gotten used to that, but with Guns I just fell into my normal place in that configuration!"

HOME TURF

Touring Europe also offers Slash the opportunity to spend some time in the UK, where he spent the early years of his life. Revisiting his old stomping ground gives him a chance to reflect on the considerable impact those formative years in England had on the musician he'd become. "I didn't know it at the time, but that was where it all started for me," he reflects. "My dad and his brothers were huge rock 'n' roll junkies – the kind of kids that pulled a record out and felt the texture of the sleeve, put it on the turntable and analysed every song – serious stuff! I was raised in that… and it was like The Kinks, Gene Vincent, the Stones, some Beatles, The Who was the big one, and The Yardbirds and The Moody Blues.

"That was a very big part of my earliest memories, and then going in to London on the train and hanging out in the whole 60s beatnik scene that my dad was part of, crashing at their flats, doing all that! So rock 'n' roll guitar for me began in Stoke, and that was just part of my upbringing, so when I picked up a guitar, that was one of the reasons I was never a big 80s-guitar-influenced guy, because what really touched me was Eric Clapton and Keith Richards, Brian Jones, Mick Taylor, Dave Davies… all those different guys."

ABOVE Slash has been road-testing Gibson's latest Les Pauls with both The Conspirators and GN'R

When it came to finally getting his hands on a guitar, Slash's first experience was with the "one-string wonder" – an old Spanish guitar with a single string that his grandmother gave him. "That was my first discovery of being able to put fingers in different places and come up with something that you actually recognised," he recalls.

The most significant moment, however, was when he got himself an electric guitar with a full complement of strings. "When I got a real guitar, I started working out chords with those top three strings," he recalls. "I think the most memorable moment was when I was able to do a real blues thing – that was all, but it was an overwhelming parting of the sky!"

PAUL BEARER

It's entirely appropriate that the aforementioned epiphany happened on a Les Paul-shaped instrument, as in the decades since that experience, Saul Hudson has become arguably the most iconic Les Paul player of all. Indeed, his affection for Gibson's iconic single-cut was so inherent in Slash, he can't even recall the moment he first encountered one, it's just always been the guitar for him.

"I don't remember when I actually first laid eyes on a Les Paul," he admits. "I just remember almost subconsciously thinking, 'That's a cool-looking guitar'. Because when I started, I didn't know anything! With all that musical upbringing, and all those gigs I went to with my parents, I didn't really know anything about how a guitar worked!

"And so when I actually started playing guitar I'd have to go, 'Okay, well I like this song, or this solo, and there's a picture of the guy in the band, and he's playing that guitar…' and I remember seeing the Les Paul often enough to notice it was cool. I don't think I was ever attracted to the Strat… and the Flying V was a little bit too flashy for me."

Once he'd got one in his hands, however, that affection deepened and Slash discovered that the guitar was everything he needed it to be.

"I just feel comfortable with it," he shrugs. "I like the deepness of the tone of a Les Paul. The humbuckers have a lot to do with that. But then there's also the heaviness of it – I think that lends itself to the richness of the sound. But then I've never really known that for sure, because some very heavy Les Pauls sound very, very thin. It's just a warm guitar, and it's great for single-note stuff, which I do a lot of. If you get a good Les Paul and the right Marshall and just dial it in right, for me, that's just always been the ultimate rock 'n' roll sound."

The ultimate rock 'n' roll sound it may be, but when it comes to writing, Slash prefers to stick to one half of the equation – for reasons that are scarcely believable from one of the most admired guitarists of all time.

"My go-to guitar writing is just a non-amplified Les Paul, because I don't like anyone to hear what I'm working on – I'm very self-conscious that way!" he explains. "The electric guitar played acoustic is great if you don't want people to pay attention to what you're working on. I haven't really grown out of that.

I'm still a very self-conscious and insecure guitar player!"

Slash's marriage to the Les Paul might be a lifetime commitment, but that doesn't mean that he's not prepared to try new things in an attempt to freshen things up in their relationship. As the recording of *Living The Dream* proved, with a very un-Slash pickup choice entering the mix…

"I was a little bit more relaxed and a bit more willing to not rush through it," he explains. "On previous Conspirators records – it's been very much, 'Just pick this guitar up and do it!' But *Living The Dream* I did at my own studio, and I pulled some old guitars out and started using those. It's funny, for a lot of the record I ended up using a '56 Goldtop, which had soapbars in it – I used that for a lot of the record.

"Normally, I wouldn't be a P-90 guy, but I think I've just been falling into this thing where I like more of a guitar-y guitar sound – where you're using less gain to give a cleaner, but still aggressive, rock-guitar sound. I found that the Derrig guitar that I've been using a lot in my career is kind of a cross between a rock guitar and heavy metal, which is fine, but I think on this last record, I was going for something that was a little bit more old-school and cleaner in the guitar sound."

© Getty Images

"I'VE BEEN FALLING INTO THIS THING WHERE I LIKE MORE OF A GUITAR-Y GUITAR SOUND – USING LESS GAIN TO GIVE A CLEANER, BUT STILL AGGRESSIVE, ROCK-GUITAR SOUND"

ABOVE With Guns at the Roy Wilkins Arena in St. Paul, Minnesota in 1988

TROUBLE IN PARADISE

For a man who loves his Les Paul so much, becoming a Gibson ambassador must surely have been a dream come true for Slash, but in reality, things were not well with the Nashville company, with the business in the midst of a challenging period that culminated in a bankruptcy filing in 2018.

News of the company's financial woes took many guitar players by surprise, but as someone who was very close to what was going on in Nashville, Slash had sensed something wasn't right for some time.

"I think I was always aware of certain changes," he reflects. "Not so much in Gibson proper – it was just that there were all these new divisions being added. Amendments to the company that were unnecessary, stuff that I didn't really see the vision for. But I was like, 'Eh, whatever!' because it wasn't affecting what I do.

"But when I started to do more signature models with Gibson, I started to become more aware of the experimental stuff they were doing with the electronic stuff, which was becoming a big part of the fabric of the brand. And I was like, 'I just don't get it! I don't need it, so I don't know why anybody else is going to need it!'

"Then there was a lot of turnover happening in the last couple of years with some of the really key people who'd been at Gibson forever, and that's when it started to get a little weird. And then the inevitable happened."

The "inevitable" was Gibson filing for bankruptcy in May 2018, which led to the installation of a new CEO in former Levi's man JC Curleigh, plus a brand-new management team whose job it was to get the company back on its feet and return it to its core message as an iconic guitar company.

As befits its most famous endorsee, Slash was aware that big changes were afoot at Gibson. "I've been very close to the company for the last 10 years, but very close to the people who work there – not necessarily Henry [Juszkiewicz] while he was running it, but everybody else. So when all of this started coming down, I was very aware that it was happening and as soon as it was done, I met with the new CEO and we sat down for a couple of hours to talk about what's going on," he explains. "It's funny, I've started noticing in their marketing that something has changed – I could see that something was different."

Curleigh's track record transforming Levi's speaks for itself, but the figure in the new regime that Slash is picks out for special mention is new chief merchant officer, Cesar Gueikian. "The guy that's running Gibson now, I really, really like," he enthuses. "He's got great ideas, and he's a guitar nerd, but he's also a very smart businessman. He has a good vision for the company that's more in line with what myself and other Gibson loyalists will appreciate."

“I APPRECIATE ROCK ’N’ ROLL’S NOT PART OF THE MAINSTREAM. I THINK IT’S GREAT, BECAUSE YOU KNOW WHO THE ROCK FANS ARE NOW, Y’KNOW?”

ABOVE Slash is working with Gibson on a new signature Les Paul – and he’s used them live lately, too

ROAD TESTED

The ‘new’ Gibson made its debut at NAMM 2019 with an overhauled range of guitars that seemed to put the focus squarely back on giving Gibson lovers modern takes on the company’s most iconic instruments. The press and fans were certainly impressed, but has Slash been equally smitten?

“The new guitars are amazing!” he affirms. “They did the first run of all their key models, and they let me play one of each, and I was like: ‘There’s such a huge difference here… but there’s nothing different!’ There’s something about the mindset going into making them that’s different. Because it’s the same guitar! But there’s definitely a noticeable change there.”

Slash reveals that he took the overhauled Les Paul models out on tour with both Guns N’ Roses and on his solo tour, and came away suitably impressed with how the guitars performed on the road.

“They feel tight and solid, is the main feel thing,” he explains. “For me, I use heavy strings, and it gives a certain amount of tension, and that is all there. But they just feel really good and they sound really good. You know how you pick up a guitar and you get a smile on your face because it’s not buzzing, it’s not doing any of those little things that you find unsavoury? You don’t think about it, you just feel happy doing it!”

He wasn’t taking the new Gibsons on tour for fun, however – as Gibson’s most high-profile signature artist, it’s understandable that talks are now in the pipeline for a brand-new Slash signature model that will incorporate these new improvements.

“There were developments that were happening right towards the end [of Gibson’s previous regime] there that I couldn’t adhere to,” says Slash. “But now we’re back to the traditional Les Paul – it’s fundamentally the same guitar, it’s pretty much a Standard. But the new one that I’m working on with them… I’m not going to give out too many details, but they’re cool, and I’m playing a couple live right now.”

KNOW YOUR PLACE

Now that he’s back in Guns N’ Roses and with nearly a decade with The Conspirators under his belt, it’s easy to forget that for a period in the 90s and early 2000s, Slash was an elite gun for hire, who worked with everyone from Carole King and Rihanna to Lenny Kravitz and The Yardbirds – we wonder if he misses the variety that period offered him…

“I’ve always loved doing that. I haven’t been doing it much lately, because I’ve been busy in two bands, and I’ve also been doing the movie-production thing,” he explains. “We’ll see if anything comes up in the near or not too distant future. I loved doing sessions and I love playing with different people and all that stuff.

“You’d meet someone who you really like and admire, or whose material you appreciated, and then you’d hang out and talk, and then end up working together. That’s how it was, especially in the late 90s and early 2000s when I was just wandering around! But I’ve just been so tied up with stuff of late I just haven’t been able to do it.”

Listen to the radio at the moment and it’s clear that the electric guitar isn’t exactly at the forefront of popular music, so as someone who knows a thing or two about bringing rock ’n’ roll to different audiences, we conclude our chat by asking Slash if he thinks guitar music is in a healthy place right now…

“Y’know, the guitar’s a funny thing,” he ponders. “It’s constantly in and out of vogue. I think in what you consider pop music, it’s a mainstay, but it’s not a featured instrument. But back in the 80s, it was like, you had fuckin’ metal or you had no guitars at all! But I am aware of where rock ’n’ roll is in the bigger commercial scheme of things, and I sort of appreciate that it’s not part of the mainstream. I think it’s great, because you know who the rock fans are now, y’know?”

Living The Dream **is out now. Slash plays the Download festival on Friday 14 June 2019**

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NEUROTIC

OUTSIDER

The GN'R bassist and self-help author on his forthcoming solo album, why Fender basses are the "gold standard" and the newfound appetite he's discovered on his most recent tour…

WORDS SAM ROBERTS

Since he first parted ways with Guns N' Roses over two decades ago, Duff McKagan has certainly kept himself busy. Since leaving the band in 1997, the bassist and guitarist has been in more bands than you'd care to count – most notably Velvet Revolver, Alice In Chains and Loaded – had a financial-advice column for *Playboy* magazine and become a best-selling author on the back of his 2015 self-help tome, *How To Be A Man (And Other Illusions)*.

Somehow, he's also found time to forge a career as a solo artist, with his third album, *Tenderness*, due for release on 31 May. Its predecessor, 1999's *Beautiful Disease*, never saw the light of day due to a merger between Polygram and Universal.

And then there's GN'R – after playing a few shows with Axl and co back in 2014, Duff joined Slash in the band full-time in 2016, setting the stage for the aptly named Not In This Lifetime… Tour, which spanned two-and-a-half years and 159 shows. It was a monster undertaking and one that became a unique source of inspiration for Duff, resulting in his most ambitious solo work yet. "The last two years on tour were some of the most interesting times, not just for me, but for America and the whole world," he says. "There's a lot of people screaming and shouting, so I was thinking about a third book as a commentary, but then I wrote *It's Not Too Late* and realised I've wanted to do a record like this for a while."

The album's recurring themes of peace and calmness seem to reflect where his headspace is nowadays, in direct contrast to his unrelenting schedule. He credits this to his time as a columnist, which gave him a broader perspective of the world that usually sails past his tour-bus window. "I used to think, 'What the fuck am I gonna write about next?' So I'd say this record is more of an observation, it's not putting the blame on anyone, but I do realise there's a great divide that's not as bad as the media depicts it," he says. On his third solo album proper, he worked with Shooter Jennings, who, like Duff, wanted the long player "to sound real and approachable in order to sum up the intent of the record".

WELCOME TO THE RUMBLE

Despite juggling his writing and solo work with the minor issue of reforming the biggest rock band of the 80s for the second-highest grossing tour of all time, Duff has also managed to find space to squeeze in a new collaboration with Fender, which has produced the new Duff McKagan Deluxe Precision Bass.

Based on Duff's previous signature model, which was inspired by his 1986 Jazz Special, his new signature reimagines that guitar's characteristics while adding more player-friendly features such as "fancy block inlays," as he puts it, and a Hipshot Bass

ABOVE Fender's new Duff McKagan Deluxe Precision Bass is the GN'R man's second signature model with the company

"I BOUGHT THAT FIRST JAZZ SPECIAL AT GUITAR CENTER ON SUNSET BOULEVARD... WHEN WE GOT OUR RECORD ADVANCE IN GN'R, I WENT AND BOUGHT THAT BASS!"

ABOVE Duff's new Deluxe Precision signature model is based on the 80s Jazz Bass Special he played on the *Appetite For Destruction* tour, hence the headstock decal

FACING PAGE, TOP The Deluxe Precision is available in White Pearl and Black finishes. It has a Seymour Duncan STKJ2B bridge pickup and a Precision Bass split-coil in the middle position

FACING PAGE, BOTTOM RIGHT Duff with Shooter Jennings, producer of his new solo LP

Xtender tuner on the E string. The early development of his second signature model, however, stretches right back to the acquisition of his first Jazz Special from a certain music store in Los Angeles…

"I bought that first Jazz Special at Guitar Center on Sunset Boulevard. We rehearsed and lived right behind it and I was always that guy that went in but never bought anything. When we got our record advance in GN'R, I went and bought that bass!"

What was unique about said bass was its unusual neck shape, which Duff only discovered due to the success of Guns N' Roses' debut album. "On the *Appetite* tour, I only used that bass, and when I got a proper bass tech, I got another Jazz Special and the neck was totally different. I spoke to someone at Fender and they invited me in, took the neck off and spun it in some computer graphic thing and it showed up more egg-shaped than a C shape! I got so used to it that they replicated it for me."

It wasn't until his time in Velvet Revolver that he developed a penchant for modding his gear, where he used a heavily mutated version of Fender's Aerodyne Jazz Bass. "We modded the shit out of that bass!" Duff laughs. "There was some space in the body that we filled with foam… McBob [Mike Mayhue, Duff's bass tech for over 30 years] also tried taking out the toggle switch on my bass once and it sounded totally different, so we just rubber cemented it! You can't move the toggle switch on *any* of my basses now."

During a UK tour with Velvet Revolver, Duff received a Geddy Lee Jazz Bass with the aforementioned Hipshot tuner mod, which he came to fully utilise upon returning to the US with the Seattle-based band The Walking Papers. "When The Walking Papers formed I played on their record, and when we gigged it I had to fill more space, so the hipshot came in really handy for de-tuning. I could play a two-and-a-half hour show and I wouldn't have to change my bass once. In Guns, I have the luxury of having a backup for every bass, but I'm now super comfortable and I could play a three-hour show with this one bass."

Duff's loyalty to his Fender bass is admirable and he affirms it's not through a corporate endorsement,

but is instead based on the reliable quality of the product. "It's the gold standard. I'm not trying to be a company guy or anything, that's just the way it is. I have other basses, sure, but I don't really know why I'd go anywhere else."

His humility is obvious, and still he finds it difficult to believe he's regarded as a true great, let alone worthy of having more than one signature instrument. "I never thought as a kid I'd have a signature anything, the best bass players out there all use Fender. So for me to have two distinct Fender signatures is kinda mind blowing, really!"

But after returning to the band that started it all with expertise outside of the music business, too, we can't help but wonder what's next for the Rock And Roll Hall Of Fame inductee? "There's stuff in the works in the big camp. It's been a real honour to play for the GN'R fans that remain. Us getting back together and sorting some shit out really made us at ease again and gave me intellectual capital on this tour. I owe a lot to Slash and Axl for that. It wasn't stressful at all, it was the opposite."

***Tenderness* is out 31 May via Universal Music. For more on the Fender Duff McKagan Deluxe Precision Bass, see fender.com**

© Scott Dudelson

Tom Misch might be just 24 years old, but the Strat-loving guitarist already has a critically acclaimed Top 10 album, is a leading light of the new wave of British jazz and soul and racks up three million plays a month on Spotify. Despite this, he remains determined to shun the traditional pressures of the music industry. Here, the self-proclaimed "bedroom producer" explains why he doesn't need a traditional label, why he loves Robert Glasper and why he won't be a musician forever…

WORDS SAM ROBERTS **PHOTOGRAPHY** ELEANOR JANE

ON THE MAP

The grand surroundings of Universal Music Group's London offices with its porcelain-coloured walls and David Shrigley paintings, serve as a prescient reminder that despite reports to the contrary, the music industry is still very big business indeed. But if he's impressed by these surroundings, Tom Misch isn't showing it. If you've not heard of the Dulwich native just yet, he's happy with that.

"I don't want a big budget behind my music or to be on billboards everywhere," he affirms. "I want people to discover my music because they like it, or it's been recommended by a friend."

Despite this, the humble, unassuming guitarist has already seen his self-released 2018 debut LP *Geography* land in the UK Top 10, has worked with De La Soul and sold out his recent European tour – all by the age of just 24. That's not too bad for a bedroom guitar player who rose to fame as a SoundCloud producer while he was still at school.

Misch's jazzy, intricate guitar style speaks to a life spent with the instrument, but it wasn't always supposed to be this way, at least if his dad had anything to say about it…

"Violin was my first instrument, I started playing when I was four. I didn't really want to do it, but my dad said: 'You will play violin!'" Misch explains.

But in a bohemian family – in which his mother was an artist and his sister a musician in her own right – it didn't take long before he found his own path. "My sister played guitar and there was always one lying around the house," Tom recalls. "So I started playing when I was about nine and that's when I fell in love with it."

While studying music technology at his local sixth-form college, Tom quickly learned to produce, which in turn gave him another outlet for his musical

“STRATS ARE SUCH EXPRESSIVE GUITARS. IT HAS A GREAT CLEAN TONE BUT RETAINS THAT WARMTH, TOO. I LIKE HAVING ONE GUITAR THAT DOES EVERYTHING”

THIS SPREAD Tom’s guitar and musical diet is diverse, ranging from gospel-influenced players such as Erick Walls and Isaiah Sharkey to jazz, hip-hop and TV series such as *The Get Down*

exploration. “Suddenly, I had a platform to compose and put my ideas down, guitar and drums et cetera,” he explains. “It gave me a different skillset, guitar-wise, it’s different to playing live or in your bedroom. I was recording for songs that I was working on personally. You have to be more focused and in the pocket than if you’re just jamming along.”

SMART CASUAL

Back in 2013, this experimentation paid dividends when his song *Follow*, which features older sister Laura on saxophone, was picked up by the influential YouTube channel Majestic Casual. That video went on to receive over 2.7 million views, alongside the 760,000 plays it picked up on SoundCloud.

Prior to releasing his debut album and previous mixtape, the aptly named *Beat Tape 2*, Misch enrolled in a jazz-guitar course at Trinity Laban Conservatoire, which he quickly dropped out of to capitalise on his rapidly growing success. “It was a traditional four-year degree. I was learning original 1930s and 40s jazz, and I’m not interested in that at all,” he admits. “The best thing I took from that, though, was that I was playing guitar every day. So I became really familiar with the instrument, and by the end of the year, guitar playing was even more natural to me.”

Despite his time studying jazz guitar getting cut short, it hasn’t deterred his unabashed interest in musical education. “I couldn’t tour or fully dedicate my time to it, but I found studying really important and that’s why I want to do it again,” he reflects.

“I think it’s really important to keep educating yourself. I want to be the best musician I can. I think I’d like to study composing or musical history. Maybe I’ll release an album, then take time off to study, that sort of cycle. Just for the joy of it, and to add to my toolbox.”

PLAYING OUTSIDE

Instead of honing his jazz skills, Misch has since developed a nuanced playing style that mirrors that of *Continuum*-era John Mayer with the cerebral dynamism of J Dilla’s instrumental beat-making, while his overall compositions also find space for his love of jazz-pianist Robert Glasper’s take on modern R&B. “I love Robert Glasper,” Misch enthuses. “Listening to him changed the way I play guitar and the way I approach melodies and just jazz harmonies in general.”

In true Millennial fashion, Tom says his primary influences are guitarists and session players who have found a new platform on a popular online video-sharing platform…

“I’m mostly influenced by YouTubers actually,” he affirms. “I love Erick Walls, he’s left-handed but plays right-handed guitar. He shreds, but in a soulful, bluesy, gospel style. I also like Isaiah Sharkey who plays for D’Angelo and Jairus Mozee. I love R&B guitarists who have come out of church with that gospel influence. I think it was through discovering a lot of hip-hop and then the roots of the samples and players, you just dig and the music connects. Like crate-digging online.”

Misch’s route to classic players and records goes against the traditional method of discovering music, and his love of modern culture also extends to pulling influences from television, noting Netflix’s series *The Get Down* as another pivotal influence in him developing his sound.

It’s this approach that lends itself neatly to his preferred way of working and releasing music. *Beat Tape 2* was a collection of carefully curated works, rather than an album in its purest form.

“I’ve never been one for working on an album and making it all cohesive until now. I called it a beat tape because it was just ideas and rough sketches, I wouldn’t call it an album,” Tom explains.

© Joshua Halling

ABOVE Misch's pedalboard has some choice cuts, including the Aguilar Filter Twin – bought because he saw one on Stevie Wonder bassist Nathan Watts' board

GEOGRAPHY LESSONS

When the time came to craft his first official long player, *Geography*, Tom again struggled to create a work that he was satisfied with due to the time pressures involved. "*Geography* was rushed. I don't love it," he says with slight exasperation. "It was rushed because I had a deadline and I just wanted more time."

Artists are often their own worst critics and in the case of *Geography*, it certainly doesn't sound like something that was rushed out of the door. Instead, it feels more like a bridge between the world of SoundCloud's producer-cum-musicians and a conventional album. This feeling is further emphasised by the collaborations on the record, including fellow South Londoner Loyle Carner, MC GoldLink and a little-known hip-hop group by the name of De La Soul.

"I think someone at Universal said they had a contact for De La Soul and we sent them the track," Tom explains of the unexpected team-up. "Pos [Posdnuos, aka Kevin Mercer] said: 'I'm down,' so we then sent it to him and he did it! That was a special moment. He recorded it in the US and sent it over, then we met when shooting the video."

Perhaps unsurprisingly, given his SoundCloud roots, collaboration is a hugely important part of Tom's process, whether that's in the studio or on stage. "Having someone's presence there puts them in mind and makes you think about what they specifically want from the track," he enthuses.

His forthcoming work with drummer Yussef Dayes is a case in point, allowing him to push his own envelope even further. "I'm really excited by it because it's like nothing I've done before. It has a lot of Radiohead vibes, mainly like *In Rainbows*, and there's a trap tune on that record," Tom elaborates. "I'm letting go of my safety net, so to speak. It also has strings, it's a lot darker than my previous work! I haven't thought about it too much, it just feels like the next step. It's unique, because not many collaborate with a drummer, either. Guitar-wise, I'm delving out into other stuff, there's more of a rock vibe there."

AMERICAN BOY

When it comes to his choice of instruments, Tom believes there's only one real option. "I used the American Pro Strat during a gig in Amsterdam, but I've always used Fender guitars," he confirms.

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ABOVE Strat devotee Tom has recently begun using this American Performer Strat live, as he feels the neck offers easier access than the John Mayer signature model he's used for the last seven years

"My first choice is a John Mayer signature Strat, which I've used for the last seven years. I just see Strats as such expressive guitars, it has a great clean tone but retains that warmth, too. I like having one guitar that does everything.

"At jazz college, I used an Ibanez Artcore, but that didn't get used on the record. Well, maybe once by accident! I guess this music doesn't really demand instrument changes. It's really important that the right gear is used and that's the key ingredient."

Misch doesn't veer too far from the norm when it comes to amplifiers either, mainly using a Blackface Deluxe Reverb, but has been experimenting with more modern approaches of late. "On all my records, I use the Logic Pro 9 plug-in Guitar Pro," says Tom. "It's a budget little plug-in with guitar amp sims and that's kind of become my sound. On tour, I've been using a Kemper rack unit, so there's no amp on stage. I'm thinking of going back to using an amp though, it just feels a bit wrong plugging into a computer and then only hearing it through my in-ears!"

KEEP THE HOME FIRES BURNING

Despite Tom's rapidly growing success, he doesn't seem too pleased by the publicity. The initial uptake in interest came as a direct result of the hard work he put in from his East Dulwich bedroom and he has no plans to change that yet.

"It makes no sense for me to sign to a label when I have my own label, *Beyond The Groove*, which I service through AWAL [Artists Without A Label – a service that allows independent artists to benefit from marketing, distribution and similar 'big label' amenities while maintaining ownership of their music]," he explains.

"I don't want to be massive, I feel like I'm already pretty big, y'know? When you have loads of money pushed into you as an artist, you're not big because people like your music, you're big because you've been pushed in front of people."

When we tell him it's refreshing to hear a new artist doing everything to maintain his independence, he seems surprised. "It's better if you can be self-sufficient and the label aren't taking a big cut, it's a no-brainer. AWAL are a big part of that, and the worst thing would be to be signed and have three more albums that I *had* to do. This is meant to be my year off!"

***Geography* by Tom Misch is out now on Beyond The Groove**

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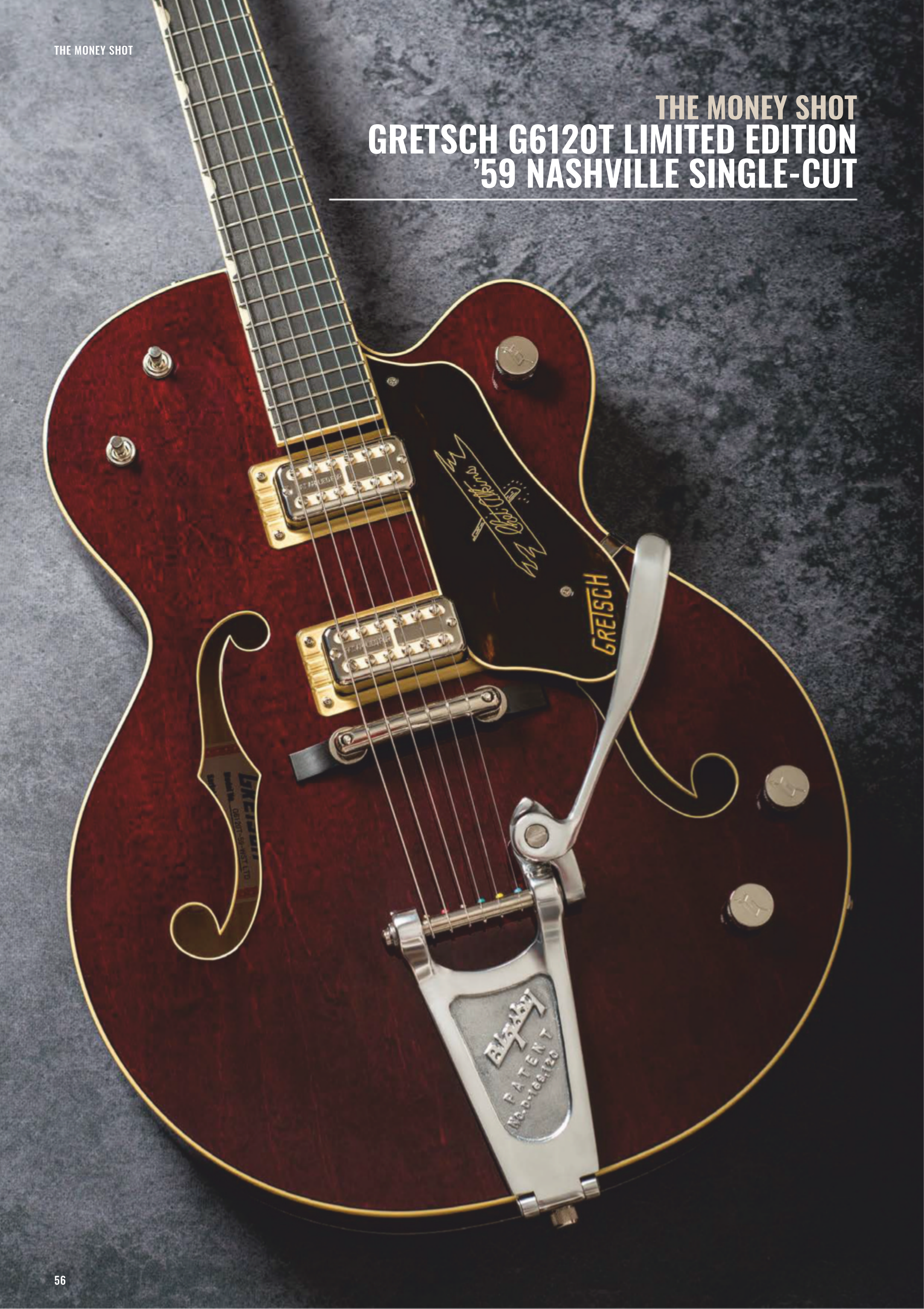
THE MONEY SHOT
GRETSCH G6120T LIMITED EDITION '59 NASHVILLE SINGLE-CUT



Limited to just 25 pieces for Europe, the Middle East and Africa, this gorgeous Dark Cherry Stain 6120 combines classic elements from different points in the Gretsch company's 1950s golden era.

The TV Jones Ray Butts Ful-Fidelity pickups, switching, headstock shape, inlays and Rocking Bar Bridge are a nod to classic late-50s spec, while the flat-arm Bigsby with unpainted trough, polished aluminium nut, 'steerhead' headstock inlay, truss-rod cover and tortoiseshell pickguard are reminiscent of the earliest 6120s, originally released back in 1954.

In addition, the instrument features a gloss nitrocellulose finish, a pinned bridge for increased stability, Squeezebox paper-in-oil tone capacitors and a treble-bleed circuit on the master volume control.

The Gretsch G6120T Limited Edition '59 Nashville Single-Cut retails for £3,199 and will be available in stores soon. Visit gretschguitars.com for more information. G

VINTAGE BENCH TEST

GOLD STANDARD

The ES-295 is one of the most iconic Gibson models of the 1950s. It probably would have earned that accolade on looks alone, but when a Tennessee picker used one to lay down some tracks with a Tupelo truck driver, the result was rock 'n' roll history. Check out this stellar example from way back in '53…

WORDS HUW PRICE

Scotty Moore didn't keep his ES-295 for very long and didn't play it on many Elvis tracks. Even so, it was enough for Brian Setzer to dub the ES-295 the "ultimate rockabilly guitar".

Most agree it only featured on the first four Elvis singles. Having traded a '52 Telecaster for his ES-295 and subsequently fitting a trapeze tailpiece and a Melita Synchro-Sonic bridge with individually intonatable saddles, Scotty chopped in the ES-295 for a '54 Gibson L-5 in the summer of 1955.

Later on, Danny Gatton was certainly partial to his ES-295, and he turned a young Joe Bonamassa

ABOVE These trapeze tailpieces are great for tone – the gold plating has rubbed away on this example to reveal nickel beneath

FACING PAGE, TOP Considering the fragility of Gibson's gold lacquer, the back of this neck is in remarkable condition

FACING PAGE, BOTTOM The patent for this tailpiece design was pending in 1952. Gibson later used the tailpiece patent number on the decals on the back of its humbucking pickups

onto them, too. Other notable users include Geordie Walker of Killing Joke, Johnny A and one of this writer's favourites, Diego Garcia – aka El Twanguero.

Les Paul claimed responsibility for dreaming up the ES-295 concept in the first place. He and Mary Ford were playing a gig for war veterans in Wood Hospital, Milwaukee and met a guitar-playing patient called Dean Davis. Les promised he could have any guitar made for him and Davis requested a "golden archtop".

Outside, a doctor told Les that Davis' case was terminal, so he called Ted McCarty and said he needed "a guitar right now – take an ES-175 and paint it gold". The guitar, with the serial number A-9196, appeared in Gibson's logs on 4 December 1951 and was sent to the hospital, but sadly, Davis had passed away before it arrived. His wife sent the guitar back to Les, and Mary Ford was later seen playing one.

FAMILY RESEMBLANCE

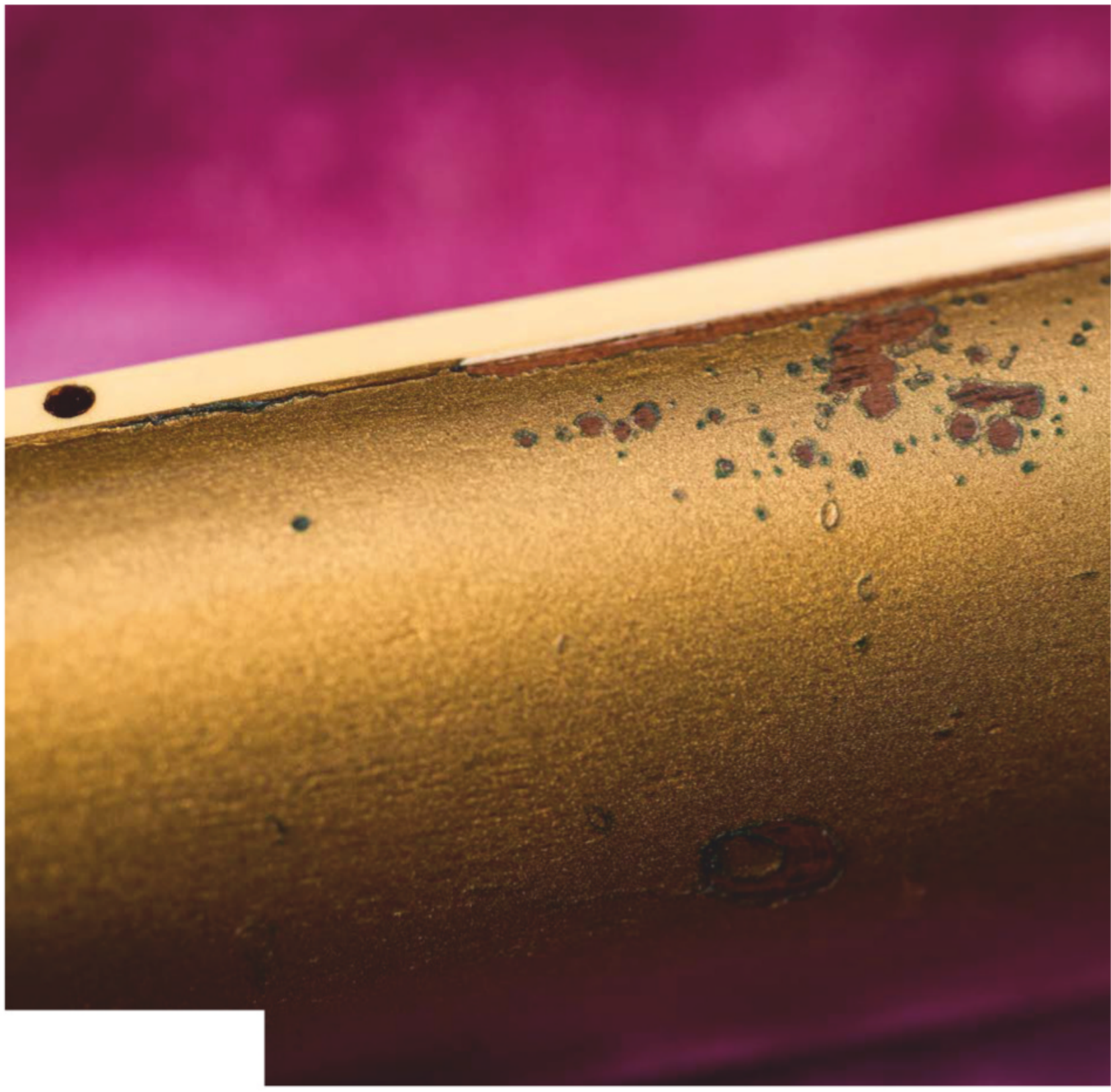
Although the ES-295 is widely regarded as simply a gold-finished ES-175 with cream pickup covers and a cloverleaf pickguard, there's a little more to it than that. The first ES-295s appeared in 1952, but the ES-175 didn't get a second pickup until 1953.

Then there's the rather obvious difference in bridge and tailpiece design. ES-175s were more traditional, with a carved-rosewood floating bridge and separate tailpiece. The ES-295 was outfitted with Les Paul's preferred trapeze tailpiece, featuring an integrated wrapover bridge – gold plated here, of course. This had significant tonal implications, which we'll address in due course.

The ES-295 wasn't the biggest seller and after switching to PAF humbuckers in late 1957, the model limped on in the catalogue until the summer of 1958. A few more were made in 1959, but in total, only 49 PAF-loaded ES-295s left the factory. Many blamed the gold lacquer for its unpopularity, so Gibson also sprayed ES-295s in sunburst, cherry and Argentine Grey. Find one of those if you can!

Over the years, it became apparent that Gibson's gold lacquer was never the most robust of finishes. It's common to see vintage ES-295s with lacquer flaking off the neck and body, and playing one can be a rough ride. However, we're pleased to report this particular ES-295 has survived in remarkable condition.

A 1953 example that comes in its original Lifton 'Cali Girl' case, there are no issues with the finish. There is, however, a diagonal crack running along



KEY FEATURES

PRICE £6,995
DESCRIPTION Hollow-body electric guitar. Made in the USA
BUILD Maple ply body with mahogany neck, bound Brazilian rosewood fingerboard, 19 frets
HARDWARE Kluson tuners, trapeze bridge and tailpiece combination
ELECTRICS 2x P-90 pickups, 2x volume, 2x tone, 3-way toggle selector switch
SCALE LENGTH 629mm/24.7"
NECK WIDTH 42.9mm at nut, 52.6mm at 12th fret
NECK DEPTH 20.5mm at first fret, 23.5mm at 9th fret
STRING SPACING 36mm at nut, 50.7mm at bridge
WEIGHT 2.95kg/6.5lb
FINISH Gold nitrocellulose
CONTACT ATB Guitars atbguitars.com

the bass side of the body that extends from the centre of the lower bout to beyond the middle of the upper bout. An excellent repair has been carried out that has stabilised the crack without attempting to disguise anything – we'd regard it as a battle scar more than a blemish, and it certainly makes the asking price more accessible.

The same US repair shop also performed a very good refret. The wire is period-correct in width, but provides a little more height and the original nut has been swapped for a very well made bone replacement. Fortunately, the electronics have never

IT'S A HUGE TONE THAT GLIDES EFFORTLESSLY FROM MELLOW JAZZ TO BLUES AND ROCK – IT'S ALMOST AS IF THERE'S AN INBUILT COMPRESSOR ADDING SUSTAIN

ABOVE Gibson used gold spacers for ES-295 bridge pickups. The cream pickup covers are more rounded than later black P-90 covers

FACING PAGE The line in the finish that runs across the lower part of the guitar's top is more apparent in photographs than it is in person – it's likely an example of shop-window fade

been touched. Our inspection mirror reveals factory pots with a pair of 'Grey Tiger' tone capacitors.

The Kluson tuners are in fine shape and retain their gold lustre, while much of the tailpiece plating has rubbed away to reveal the nickel beneath. The speed knobs and switch tip are all original and despite a slight dip in the top, the guitar feels structurally solid. With its straight neck, classic full early 50s profile and low action, the playability cannot be faulted.

TRAPEZE ARTIST

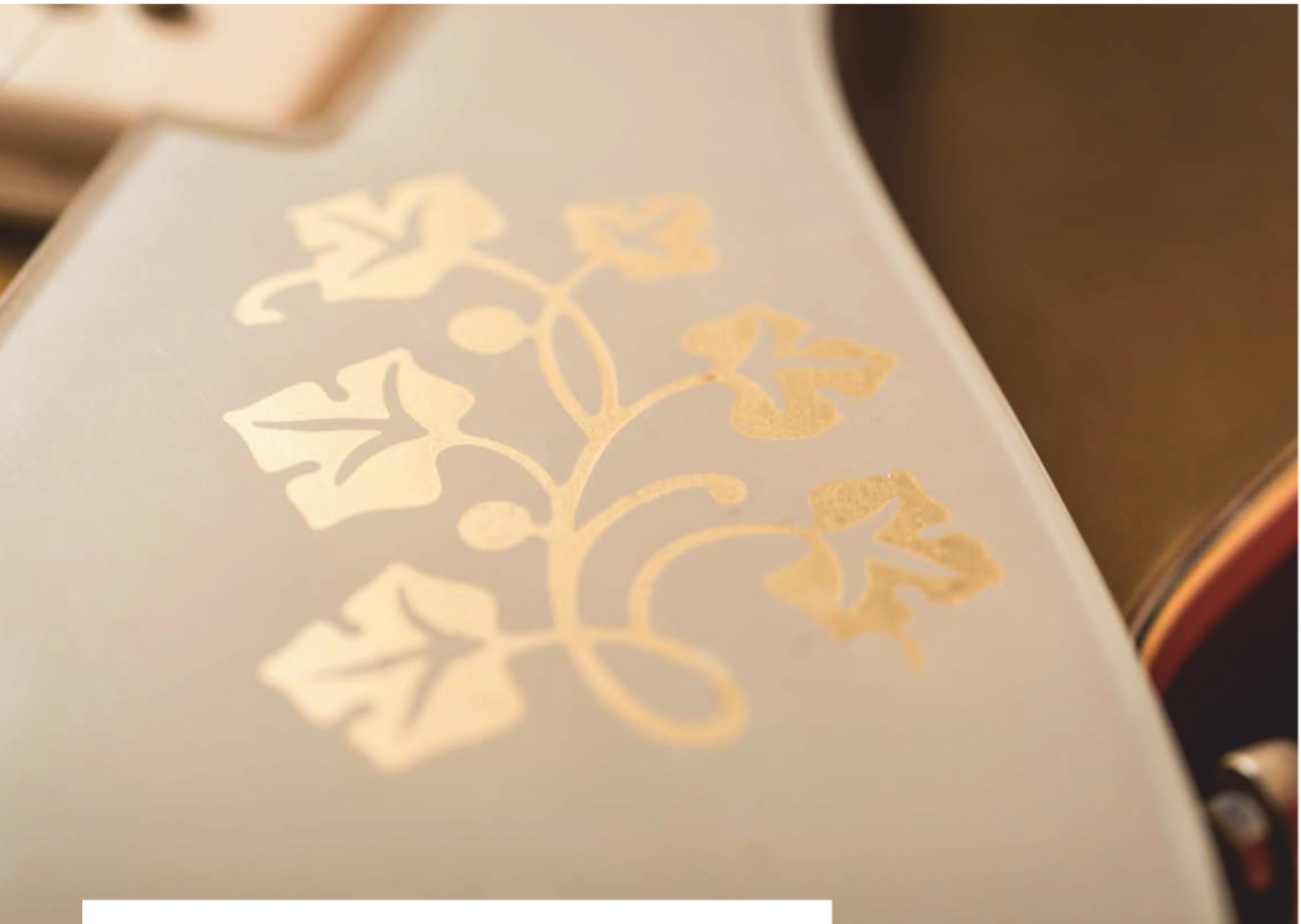
Since this ES-295 arrived with us at the same time as a 1956 ES-175, it's an opportunity to compare like with like. Perhaps surprisingly, we discover that the two Gibsons sound very different.

The ES-175 has much more of an 'acoustic archtop' tone, with a percussive brightness, dry bass and not much sustain. In contrast, the ES-295 is louder, thicker, a little darker and sustains superbly. Since we don't subscribe to the gold-lacquer 'resonance dampening' hypothesis, the explanation appears to be very simple: it's all about the tailpiece.

We can also point to the example of our recently acquired 1956 ES-225. That came with a Tune-o-matic bridge installed and the broken original tailpiece tucked inside the case. Repairing and reinstating the trapeze dramatically improved the guitar and although it's not bolted into the body, we find Les Paul's trapeze design sounds a lot like a Gibson wrapover.

Back to the ES-295 and although it's far from pristine, we don't think this guitar has been played that much. Two clues are the fact that a second strap button has never been fitted, and the pickup pole screws retain most of their gold plating. The latter may be also attributable to the way they have been screwed so far down, as when the guitar arrives, they're actually below the pickup covers.

Consequently, the guitar sounds a little lacklustre when plugged in until we unscrew the poles to bring them closer to the strings. It's a case of rise and shine, as the ES-295's true voice emerges. It's a huge tone that glides effortlessly from mellow jazz to rockabilly, blues and rock.



THIS IS ONE OF THOSE ‘SELL EVERYTHING TO BUY IT’ GUITARS WE ENCOUNTER FROM TIME TO TIME. IT SHOULD PROBABLY COME WITH A HEALTH WARNING

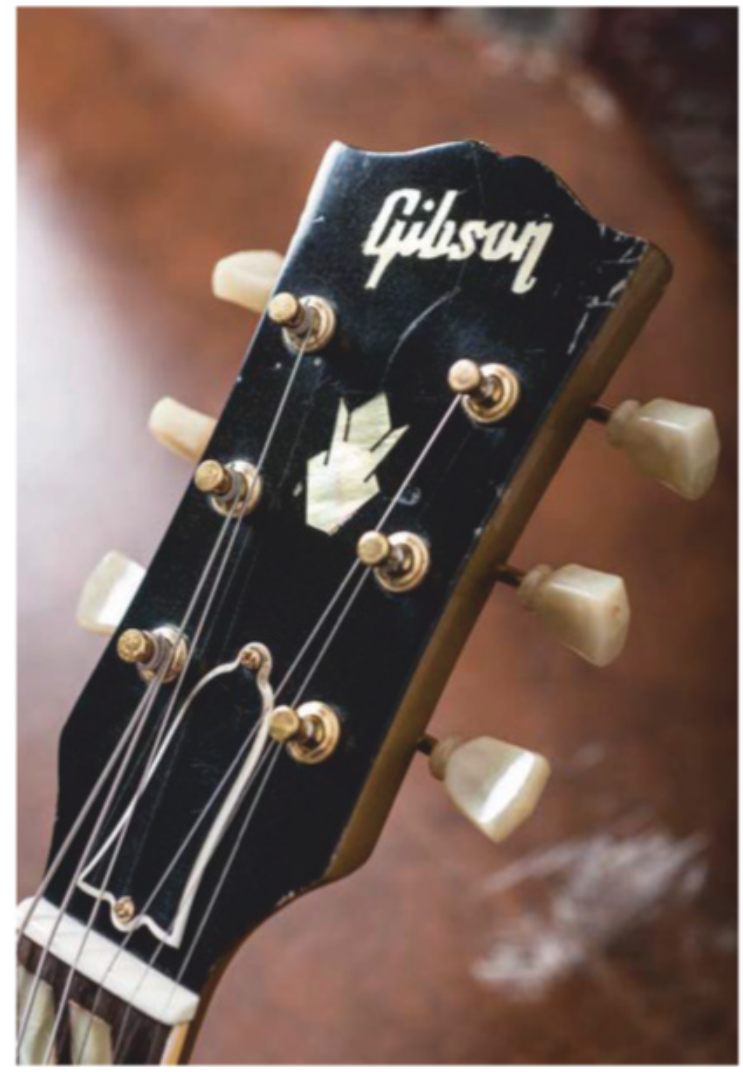
ABOVE The cloverleaf pickguard motif is one of the most iconic features of the ES-295

RIGHT The crown inlay, single-ring Klusons and the gap between the nut and trussrod cover are all correct for an early 50s ES-295

Although quite similar to our ES-225, the ES-295 sounds richer, darker and more muscular. It’s almost as if there’s an inbuilt compressor holding everything together and adding sustain – but without subduing the dynamics.

The big revelation comes when we crank our Rift PR18 up to 10 and there are no feedback issues – even with the guitar about a metre away from the speaker. Instead, we get huge powerchords and the ability to chime through the overdrive. When we switch to soloing, the ES-295 responds more like a hollow Les Paul Goldtop.

Although there’s much to like about an ES-175, this ES-295 is even better because it does so much more and looks amazing into the bargain. This is definitely one of those dangerously good, ‘sell everything to buy it’ guitars that we encounter from time to time. In fact, it should probably come with a health warning… G



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THE COLLECTION

TWO'S COMPANY

Jay Edema and David McArthur have amassed a collection of guitars – numbering in the hundreds – that will make your eyes water. But their infatuation with all things strung goes way beyond simple hoarding or speculation…

WORDS AND PHOTOGRAPHY MARK ALEXANDER

“OUR OBSESSION GOT OUT OF HAND. IF I WANTED TO STAY MARRIED, I HAD TO FIND SOMEWHERE FOR MY GUITARS TO GO, AND THIS PLACE CAME UP”

ABOVE It’s fair to say that Jay Edema is a fan of Yamaha SGs. He has 123 of them

What happens when your guitar collection gets out of hand? When your compulsion to buy erupts into an irresistible urge that never seems to ease?

Fear not, help is at hand. There are support groups you could join, or you could seek professional advice. Failing that, you could unintentionally meet a like-minded soul with the same fixation and take your guitar collection beyond the realms of reasonable to the outer limits of indulgence, just as Jay Edema and David McArthur have done. “The idea was hatched when we started working offshore in 2006,” says Jay, who is originally from the Netherlands, but now lives in Scotland. “We shared a cabin, but were on different rotas that coincided for a week at a time. That’s when we started talking about guitars.”

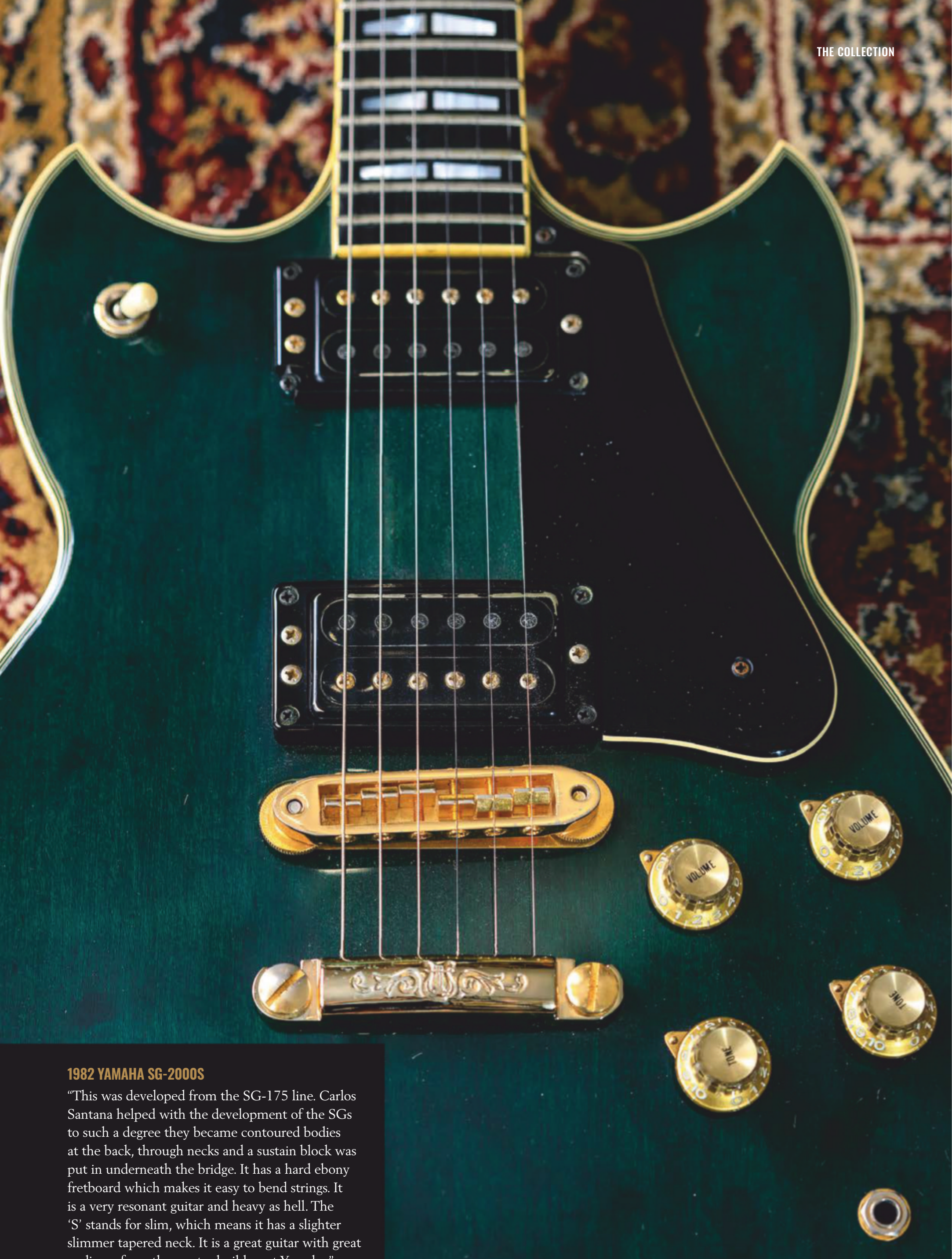
Jay is an offshore safety professional and David is a senior instrument technician in the oil industry. They work in the middle of the North Sea; both men have mission-critical jobs and share a robust and unstoppable obsession with guitars. Over the course of many animated conversations about guitars, a plan was hatched to join forces to create a monstrous collection that would eventually top more than 770 instruments. Just let that sink in.

“Our obsession got out of hand,” David explains, calmly. “If I wanted to stay married, I had to find somewhere for my guitars to go, and this place came up. It seemed logical. It was somewhere I could play my guitars without disturbing my neighbours. And it saved my marriage, because my wife had lost the plot about the amount of space in our house that was being eaten up with guitars.”

David’s refuge was a former jewellery shop found in the corner of a Fife steading that had been transformed into a craft centre. Behind a blue door and up a flight of stairs, you’ll find Unique Guitars – a truly surprising find and a rarity these days, in that it promises little from outside and over-delivers when you enter.

“When I was younger and couldn’t afford anything new, I developed a habit of never even looking at new guitars,” says David, who shares his bolthole with his dog, Haggis. “I would waltz past all the new stuff at the front of guitar shops and go straight to the second-hand stuff at the back. I wanted my shop to be full of the stuff that you got at the back of guitar shops. All the good stuff.”

David turned his marriage-saving repository into a guitar shop nearly two years ago. And like any good guitar outlet, it impresses as soon as you walk in. There’s an immediate rush of possibilities when your eyes pan around the walls stacked with rare and familiar instruments. With wall space for over 20 guitars and a further selection on floor stands, an acoustic room and a large storeroom packed with guitar cases, there’s a lot to take in. The scene



1982 YAMAHA SG-2000S

"This was developed from the SG-175 line. Carlos Santana helped with the development of the SGs to such a degree they became contoured bodies at the back, through necks and a sustain block was put in underneath the bridge. It has a hard ebony fretboard which makes it easy to bend strings. It is a very resonant guitar and heavy as hell. The 'S' stands for slim, which means it has a slighter slimmer tapered neck. It is a great guitar with great pedigree from the master builders at Yamaha."

1968 GIBSON SG
"This is a Gibson SG with a tremolo. It oozes vintage, despite it having some mods done in the past and then rectified. The trem system looks original, although someone had a fixed bridge on it and now it's back to what it was before. Nice and functional."

is completed by a range of amps including Mesa/Boogies, Fenders, Marshalls and Voxes. Were it not a shop, it would be a man-cave to be proud of.

Unique Guitars is unconventional and gorgeously independent. More importantly, it's all about buying used. "The mojo and feeling you get from an old guitar – it's a connection that you just don't get with a new guitar," says David. "That's the whole ethos of this place. This isn't really a shop run for financial gain. It's been run because we're two stupidly obsessed guys that can't get enough guitars."

IN THE BEGINNING

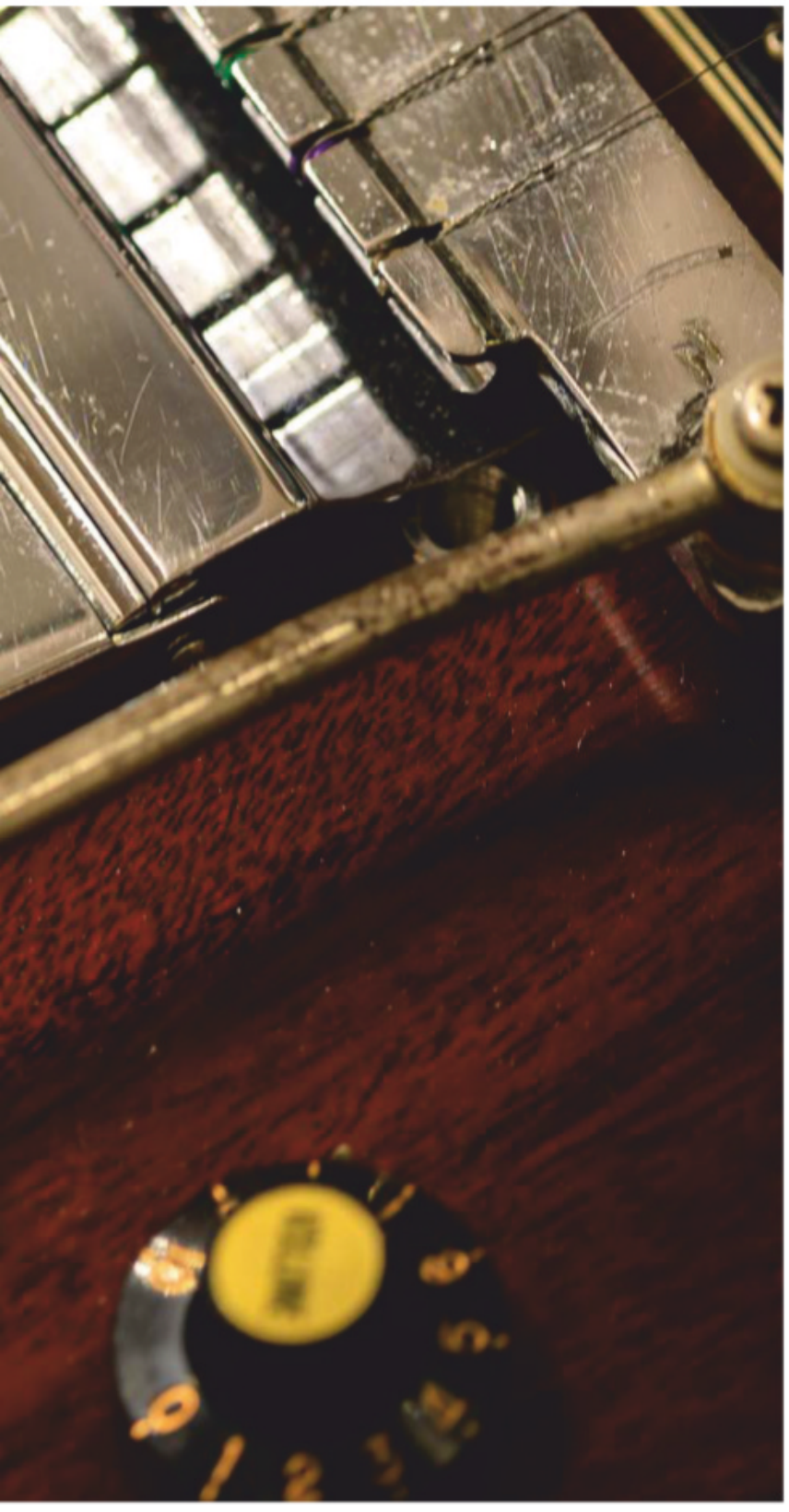
Jay grew up listening to Radio Luxembourg, prog rock, metal and rock 'n' roll. It would seem reasonable to assume his preference for guitars would be equally diverse. But while his collection – Elite Vintage Guitars – has grown to incorporate Gibsons, Fenders, Guilds and Peaveys, one particular guitar has dominated.

"My first guitar was a copy of an SG. Then I bought my first Yamaha SG-500 and then an SG-700," he says. "I'd never seen anything like the Yamaha SG. I got it second-hand. It was heavy. It felt like something substantial. I bought it from a shop in Holland in 1977. Even back then, it was a significant outlay – it was quite a few weeks of newspaper rounds and pocket money. So before I bought one, I made sure I had played quite a few."

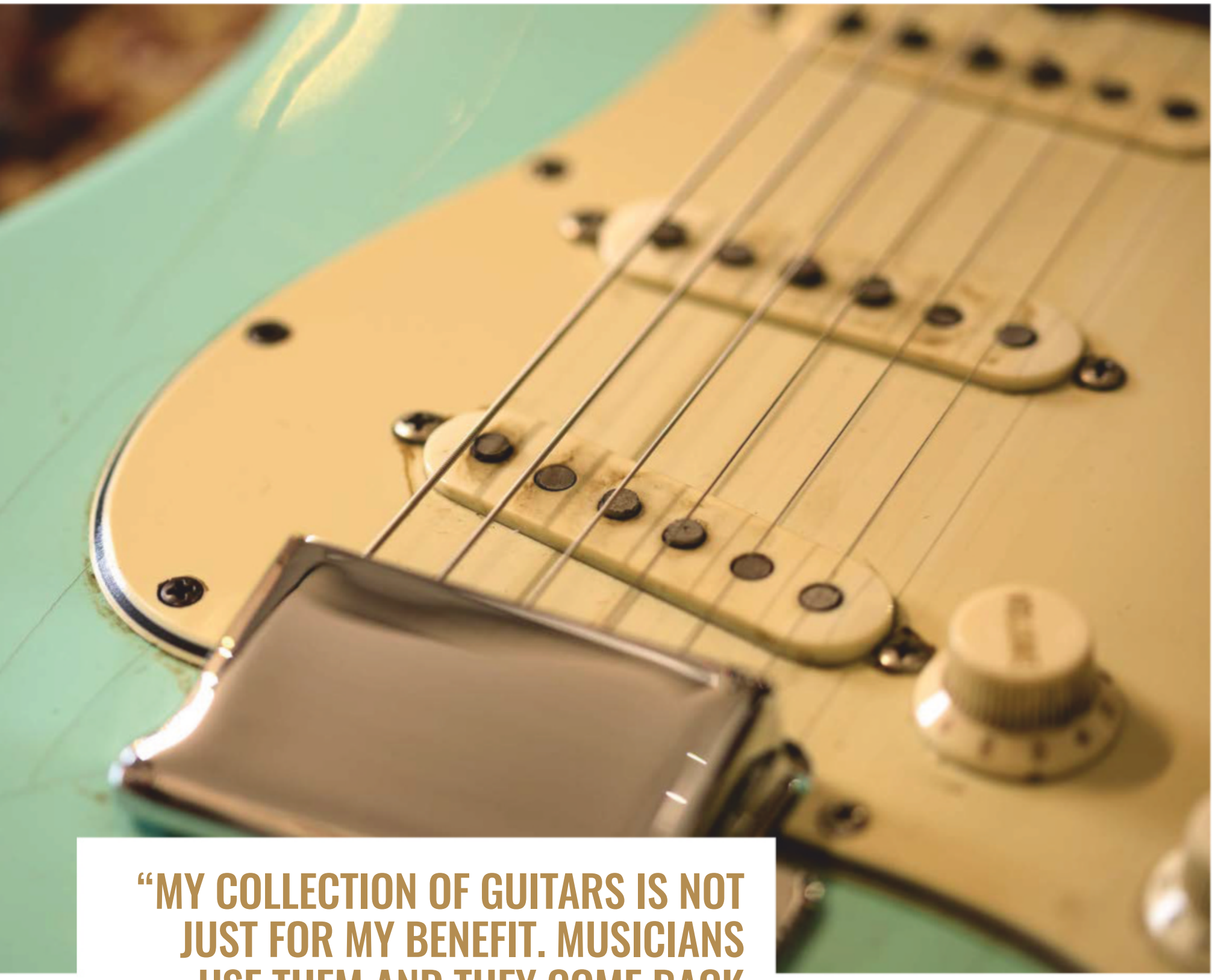
Since then, he has continued to save his pennies and has amassed 123 SG models – he has 189 Yamahas in total. "You can never have too many guitars," he says seriously, "but there is a maximum you can fit in your car!"

While the numbers might be staggering, there is a more pertinent question – why fixate on the SG? "The upper models, like the SG-1000, could sound like a Strat or Les Paul because of the option of coil-tapping. I thought it was a very versatile guitar," he says. "And I've always been a fan of Carlos Santana, so when I saw him playing one, I thought; if it's good enough for him, it's good enough for me."

David also had a moment of clarity in his early years of collecting. "There were two guitars that really changed things for me. When I was 16, I was obsessed with metal and grunge music and I picked up a Charvel 650, which I still have. I was playing in bands so I needed a back-up guitar and managed to pick up a Tobacco 1981 Les Paul Standard. It was beaten to death and it hardly had any frets on it, but, by god, it



1991 YAMAHA SG-25S
"This is a commemorative guitar celebrating 25 years of luthiery for Yamaha. It's deep purple/blue, although you can't really see it, as it looks black. It is adorned with parrots in abalone. It's like a souped-up version of an SG-3000. It has Spinex pickups, which are the top of the range. There were only 250 made, with 125 appearing in this almost-black colour. The other half were built in a wine-burst colour. Very fancy guitars and very sought after."



“MY COLLECTION OF GUITARS IS NOT JUST FOR MY BENEFIT. MUSICIANS USE THEM AND THEY COME BACK WITH SIGNATURES ON THEM: THAT ADDS TO THE COLLECTION”

1968 FENDER STRATOCASTER
“This is an old guitar. You can see that the finish has started to crackle. It has a maple neck and rosewood fingerboard. It’s a great guitar that has had some wear and tear on the body. It’s not pristine, but then again, who wants that? It’s a player’s guitar.”

FACING PAGE
Between them, Jay (L) and David (R) own over 770 guitars

was one of the sweetest-sounding Les Pauls I’ve ever had. It had a played-in feel you can’t get from new guitars. That rewired my brain. I wished I’d kept it.”

MORE THAN A SHOP

“Apart for buying and selling, we also meet incredibly interesting people,” says David. With an admirable sense of community and philanthropy, Jay and David open up their collection to musicians, inviting the likes of Big Country, Tank and The Sin Dogs to tour with their guitars in return for little more than tales from the road. It’s trusting and refreshingly generous.

“My collection of guitars is not just for my benefit,” says Jay. “I let musicians use them and they come back with signatures on them, so that adds to the collection. And they pay absolutely nothing for it. It’s just something we want to do.”

David agrees: “A lot of it is for the craic. I haven’t played in a band for 10 years. We love meeting these

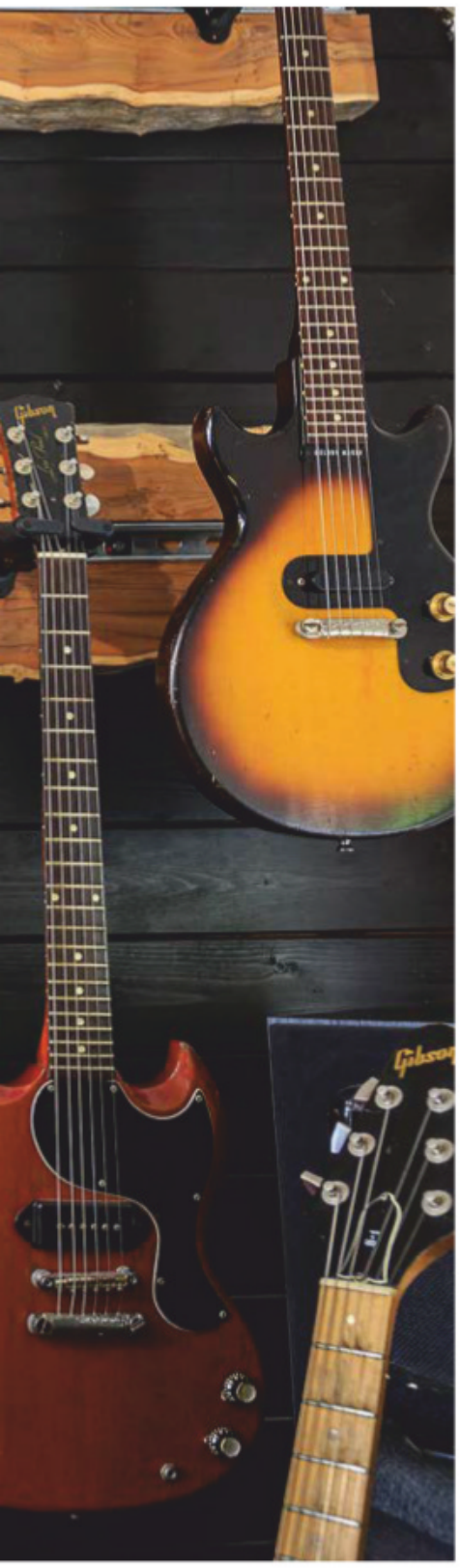
ABOVE Just a sprinkling of the many rare and vintage instruments in the Unique Guitars and Elite Vintage Guitars collection

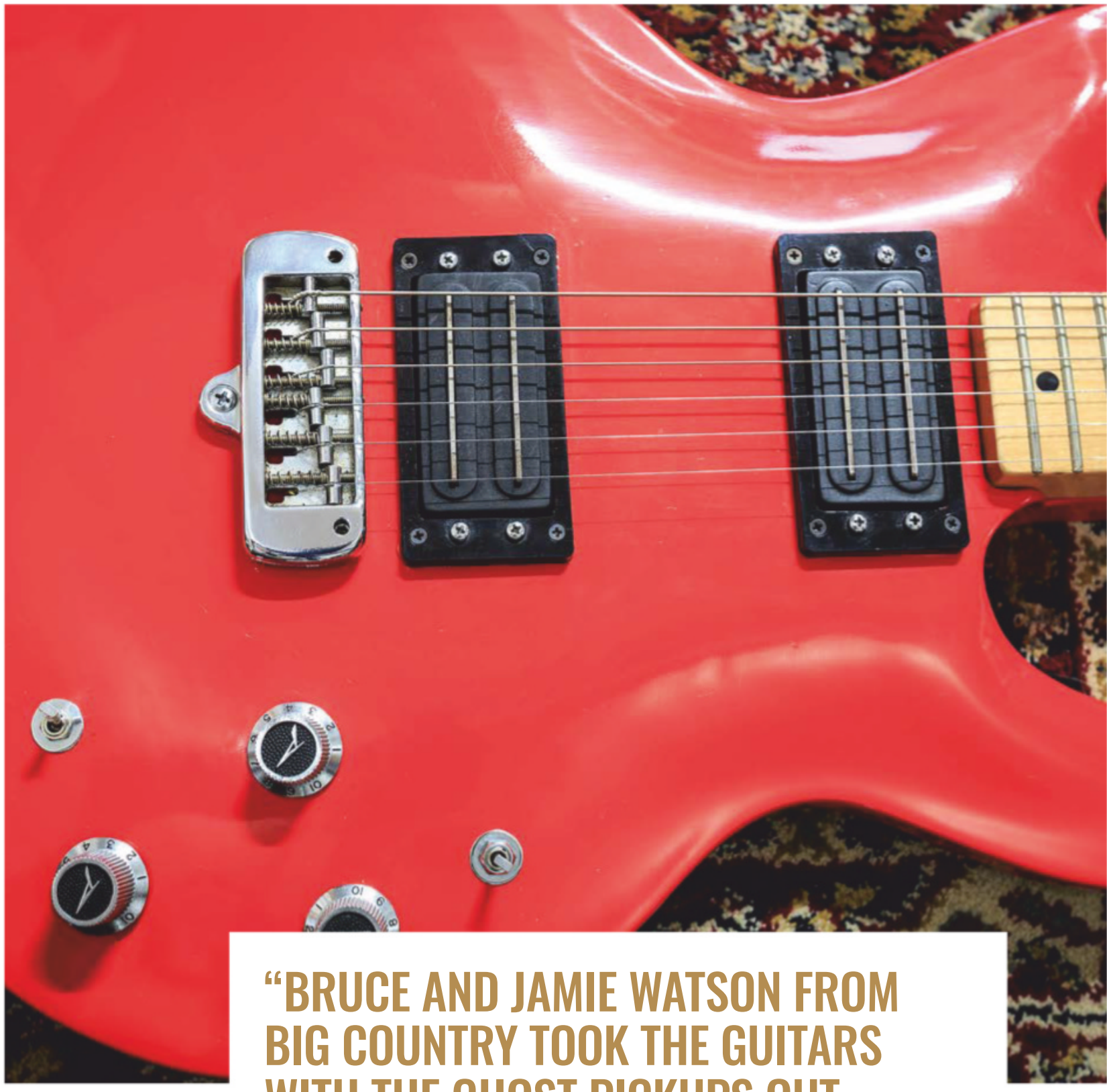
1990 GIBSON LES PAUL CLASSIC

"This one has a special story. I got this guitar in 2017. You could say it's a reissue, but it's not. It's a custom-made guitar apparently produced for Jimmy Page. There is some paperwork to suggest this is the case, but on the back of the headstock, it says 'Promotional Use Only Not For Resale'. So not your run-of-the-mill production guitar. It's a Lemon Burst Les Paul Classic, so it has a slim neck and standard mahogany body with a maple cap. It's a Custom Shop job. According to the previous owner, it was one of five. It's a wonderful piece of work, one of the nicer guitars in the collection. A few people have indicated they'd like it, but I think I'll be reluctant to sell this one!"

1973 GIBSON L5S CUSTOM

"These started with low-impedance pickups in 1972, but this one has the standard Gibson humbuckers. It's a very heavy guitar and a lot of work has gone into it. It has a trapezoid tailpiece and concertina bridge. The guitar has a 22-fret 'board heavily adorned with abalone and double binding. It looks like a jazz guitar, but it isn't. It's a solidbody and bigger than a Les Paul. It's a lovely guitar and one of the best in my Gibson collection. It's definitely a keeper."





"BRUCE AND JAMIE WATSON FROM BIG COUNTRY TOOK THE GUITARS WITH THE GHOST PICKUPS OUT ON THE ROAD, AND THEY'VE BEEN USING THEM EVER SINCE"

guys and it has rekindled my interest in playing and to get back into the scene."

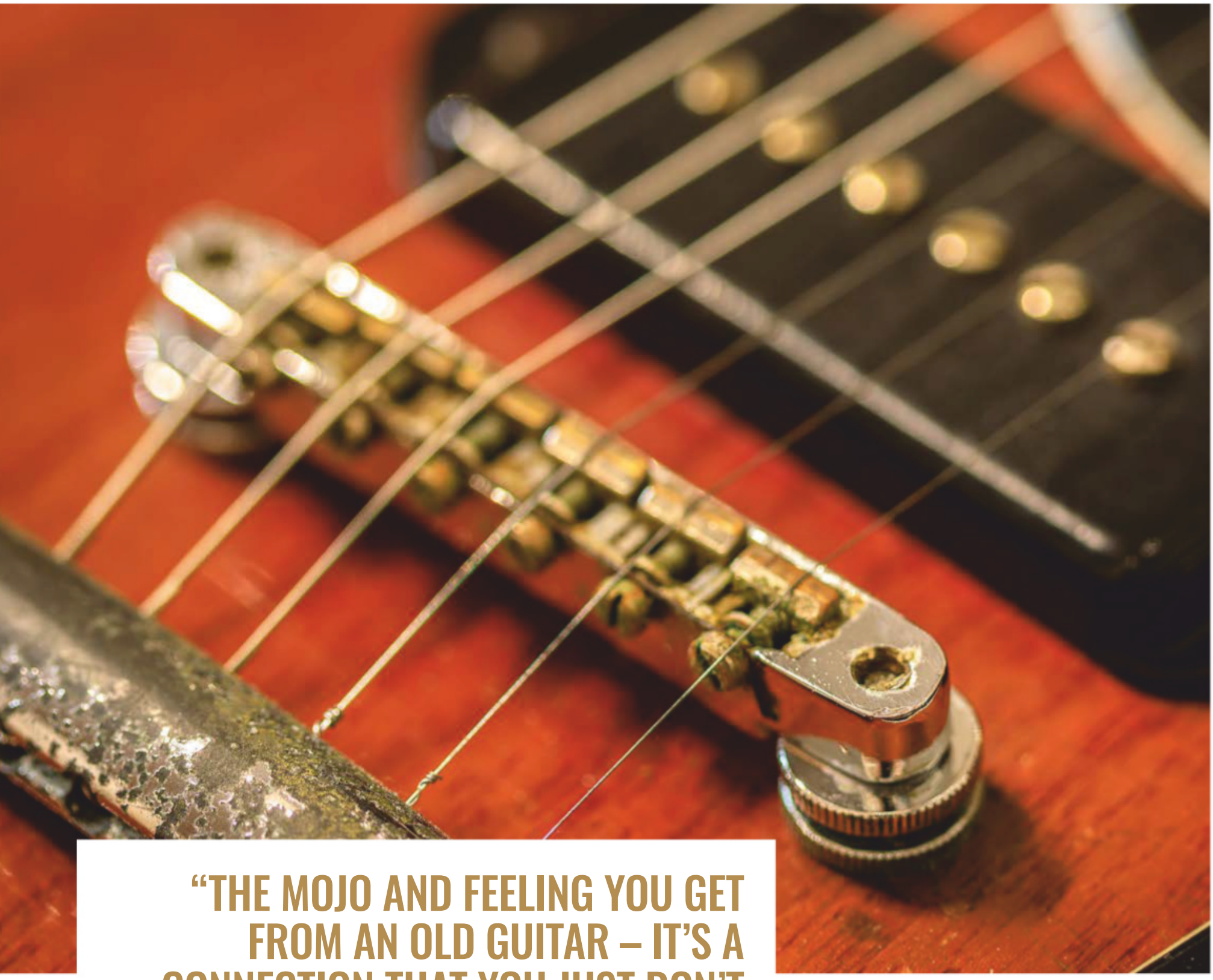
Unique Guitars and Elite Vintage Guitars are more than just shops or collections of guitars. It provides passage for an incurable addiction. It is therapy and indulgence in one, and it has taken the duo into another sphere of influence with Ghost Guitar Pickups. "I bought a guitar from a guy in Hartlepool," Jay recalls. "I sent him the cash, but he never sent me the guitar. One of the administrators for the Facebook selling page was Wilf Vissenga, who runs Ghost Guitar Pickups. He helped me sort it out.

"A lot of good came from that and we started to work with him, putting his pickups into our vintage guitars. Bruce and Jamie Watson from Big Country took the guitars with the Ghost pickups out on the road, and they've been using them ever since."

The pickups are designed and hand-wound specifically to the needs of the guitarist in a workshop

1979 PEAVEY T-25

"This is a strange beast. People often ask me: 'What is a Peavey doing in a vintage-guitar collection?' It was designed by Chip Todd, who was one of the designers working for Peavey in the US. It's a prototype of the famous T Series, which started in the late 70s and ran until the 1980s. I did a bit of digging around and found out it was one of three prototypes built for Hartley Peavey, the CEO of the company. It has an all-maple neck and a resin body. This one was sent to a distributor and somehow found its way to a collector in Glasgow and then on to me."



"THE MOJO AND FEELING YOU GET FROM AN OLD GUITAR – IT'S A CONNECTION THAT YOU JUST DON'T GET WITH A NEW GUITAR. THAT'S THE WHOLE ETHOS OF THIS PLACE"

1961 GIBSON LES PAUL JUNIOR

"It has the SG shape, but it's not what you think. One volume, one tone; it's the SG in its simplest form, but it's called a Les Paul. The word on the street is, Les Paul didn't like the shape. This is the Junior version with a single P-90 and some mods. The original tuners would've been three and three connected together, but these look like Grovers. This may be the third set of tuners on this guitar. The fretboard is rosewood, but as this is the 1961 model, it's likely to be Brazilian. The finish has a nice checking pattern that collectors love."

in the North East of England. It's a concept the pair has introduced to Zal Cleminson, former guitarist with the Sensational Alex Harvey Band and Nazareth, and the rock quintet Tank.

Jay and David are kindred spirits who share an unquenchable obsession. Their triumph is not the number of guitars they have assembled, but how they're using them to indulge their love of music.

If ever a story supports the idea the more you put in, the more you get out, this is it. Jay and David could have shied away from sharing their incredible collection, but instead created a process by which they could indulge their fascination, reacquaint themselves with the music industry and ensure vintage guitars are played where they belong; on stage.

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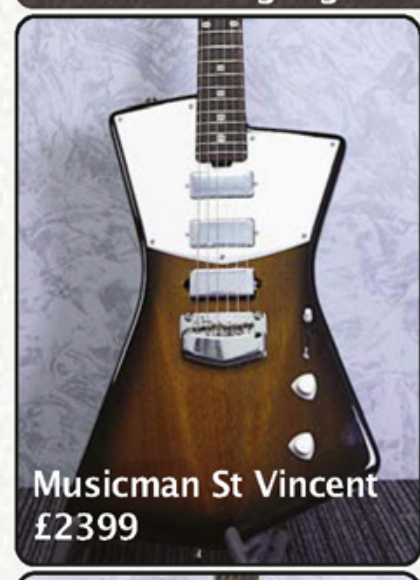

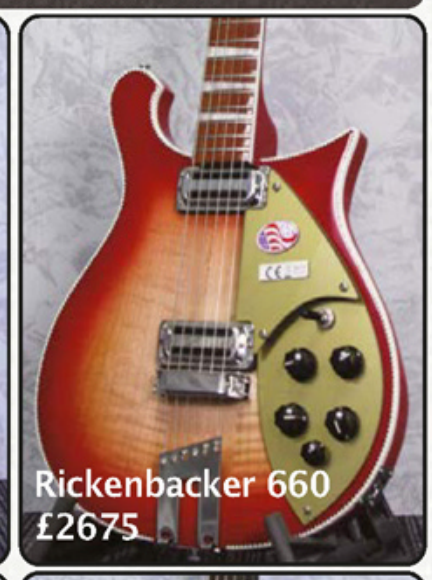

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ABERNETHY GUITARS

INTERVIEW JOSH GARDNER

Californian luthier Justin Abernethy has built a reputation for creating boutique instruments that fuse offset soul with vintage esoterica. The man himself tells us all about his journey to boutique guitar nirvana…

How did you get into guitar?
"I was a high-school freshman in 1990 when Nirvana, Alice In Chains, Pearl Jam and a long list of other great bands were starting to put albums out. It was a great time for music and the guitar. I had to learn how to play, no matter what… I bought an Antares Les Paul copy for $25 and it was all over. I was tearing the thing apart before I could even play. I had no idea what I was doing, I just wanted to know everything about it. Soon, a good friend started teaching me how to play over the phone and before I knew it, we were playing in a band…"

When did you first start building guitars?
"I started building guitars around 1999. After high school I apprenticed at a local music store for about five years doing repairs, set-ups, fretwork, etc. During my time there, an opportunity arose to work with local legend Gene Baker, building high-end boutique electric guitars.

"I learned everything at Baker Guitars – from setting up vacuum and compressor lines to working with a host of machines and seeing guitars start as raw wood through to completed instruments. The guitars were all hand-made on a pin router in the beginning, which happens to be the same pin router I use today. My time at Baker was instrumental in learning how to build, not just repair guitars. All in all, it was a great experience. I had the honour to help build guitars for Ronnie Montrose, Robben Ford and others."

What was the moment you realised that you could go it alone?
"Well, over a period of about 15 years I worked and built guitars for Baker, Ernie Ball, National Resophonic, Fine Tuned Instruments and Premier Builders Guild. I gained the necessary experience to really hone my skills. It wasn't just a job, it was something I loved to do, so, in my own time I was working on my own designs and steadily collecting the tools to do so. This prepared me for when Premier Builders Guild downsized in 2013 and I decided it was time for me to do things on my own.

"Building guitars has always been very special, a privilege, and I feel fortunate to be working on my own designs now. I lay awake at night excited about my work, endlessly thinking about new designs, ideas and what opportunities await. I love every aspect of it, from raw-wood selection, construction, paint and finally hearing it for the first time. Each one is built with love, one at a time, with purpose, unique it its own way. I fall in love with each one, trying to perfect every detail… it's a sickness!"

Did you get any initial investment?
"Well, I've been in the industry for about 20 years now, and did my first NAMM in January in the hopes of gaining a few dealers and exposure. Up to this point, everything has been an organic DIY operation. So, in a way, you guys are providing my first springboard!"

At what point did you feel like you 'nailed' your branding?
"You know, as far as branding goes, I'm really not sure If I've nailed it or not. I can tell you everyone loves the headstock design and shape of the guitars. The company name and logo is my last name, so, what's not to love!?"

What's your best-selling product?
"So far, the Sonic Empress model. And, although I have several different models, the Empress is my personal favourite. It's a 25.5-inch-scale offset guitar with vintage vibe and modern feel. I offer tonnes of options – pickups, neck shapes, colours, et cetera. I've been building them out of 100-year-old reclaimed fir and tempered maple. The response has been amazing – players really love the tone and feel."

What's your proudest moment as a maker?
"That I'm doing this on my own is something I'm very proud of. It's not a single moment that has been my proudest, but rather a trend I've seen along the way. Just about everybody I've sold a guitar to has come back to buy another, and in some cases, a few. I sold a guitar on Reverb.com to a guy and later found out that it was Jeff Tweedy. Not only that, but he wanted two more! On another occasion, Ryan

The Sonic Empress #61, with a body made from 100-year-old reclaimed fir

Lewis [of duo Macklemore & Ryan Lewis] bought one of my Steed models and went on to order another. Moments like these really make the hard work worthwhile. Having repeat customers tells me I'm doing something right. It's one of the best feelings in the world."

What are the biggest challenges and opportunities for the industry in 2019?
"For me, the biggest challenge I've faced is just getting them out there. Getting dealers to take a risk on a brand or person they've never heard of is a challenge. I've learned if I can just get the guitars into the hands of players, I know they will love them. But finding a way to do so is easier said than done. Social media and the internet has provided a great platform for the guitar industry. Reverb.com has been a huge help, and where I've done most of my business."

What are your plans for the future?
"In the future, I'm looking to do a 34-inch-scale Sonic Empress bass. I currently offer a 30-inch short scale, but people have been requesting the 34-inch. I've also started working on a chambered version of the Sonic Empress and I'm looking forward to building more of those."

For more info, visit abernethyguitars.com

"GETTING DEALERS TO TAKE A RISK ON A BRAND OR PERSON THEY'VE NEVER HEARD OF IS A CHALLENGE. I'VE LEARNED IF I CAN JUST GET THE GUITARS INTO THE HANDS OF PLAYERS, I KNOW THEY'LL LOVE THEM"

Sonic Empress #052 with its original vintage DeArmond Diamond Foil pickups

© Karen Ollis

“MAN, I DID SOME UNAUTHORISED MODIFICATIONS TO QUITE A FEW OLD FENDER AND SILVERTONE AMPLIFIERS... AND WHATEVER WAS LEFT AT MY HOUSE!”

SHOP TALK

MIKE ZAITE

AMP MAKER

WORDS DAVE HUNTER

One of the earliest figures on the boutique-amp scene, this American manufacturer's name invariably pops up any time a player seeks that optimal convergence of quality and value in a hand-wired tube amp. Paging Dr. Z!

Full disclosure: I first got to know Dr. Z founder and all-round main man Mike Zaite after reviewing his then-new Z 28 model right here in the pages of *Guitar Magazine* in the early 2000s, and we've been pals ever since. Through the course of nearly two decades since, I've been encouraged to note that while he's had to roll with the punches of a fickle and challenging market – like any smaller amp maker – he has never lost sight of the objectives he presented to me all those years ago: "Just make a great-sounding amp that's reliable, and simple, and bring it in at a great price."

Now here we are in 2019, in Dr. Z's 30th year of production, and he's still delighted every time a guitarist 'gets' what he's striven to put into a new design. He's also still devoted to delivering the same level of professional tone and performance to the young up-and-comer and casual weekend player that he provides for repeat star customers such as Joe Walsh and Brad Paisley.

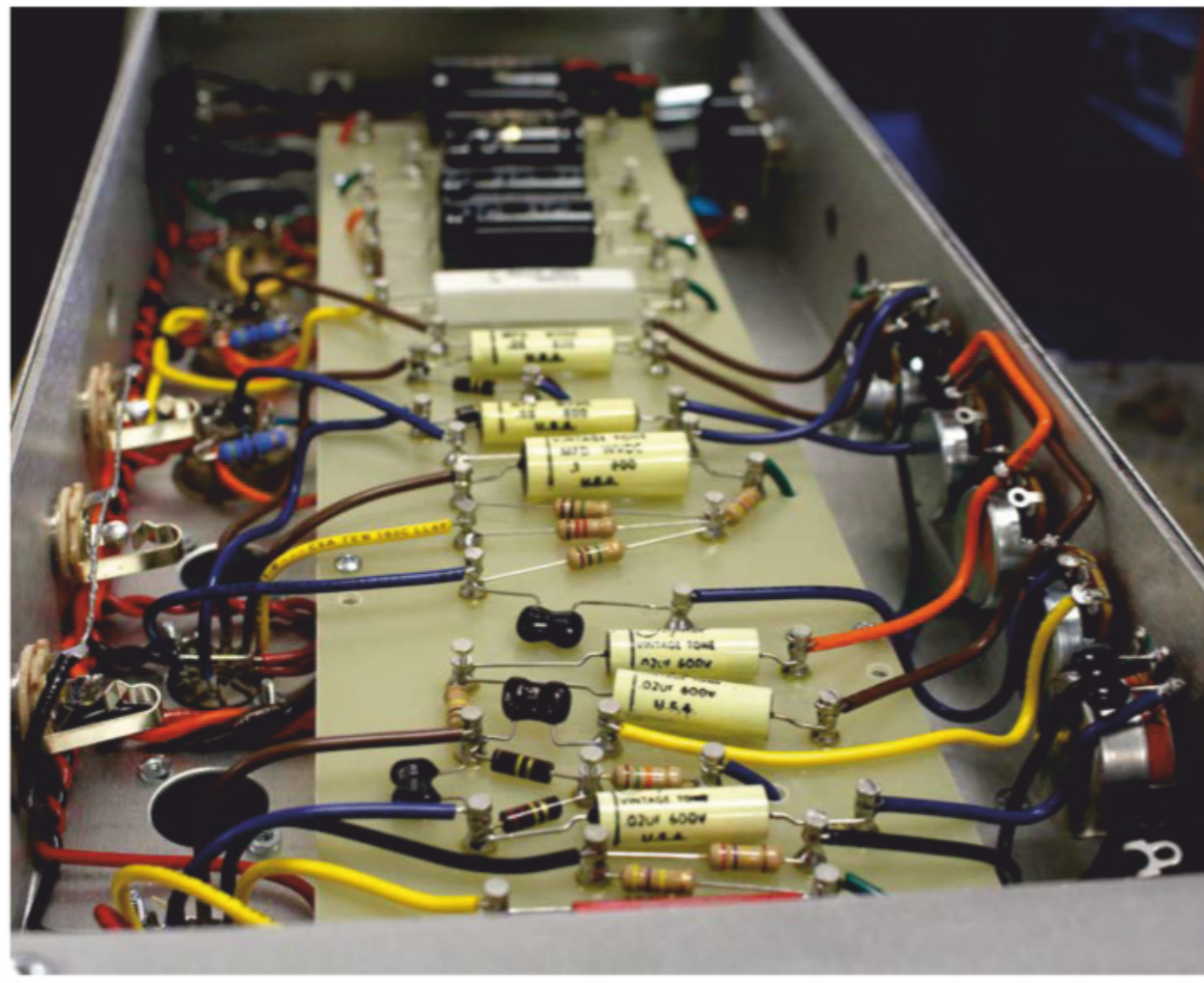
HELLO CLEVELAND

Much like Leo Fender or Jim Marshall, Zaite is not himself a guitarist. He is, however, a drummer and as a kid, he was a drummer whose parents were generous enough to allow band rehearsals in the basement of the family home in Cleveland, Ohio, meaning there were always old tube amps left behind from week to week for the electronics enthusiast to poke around in.

"Man," says Zaite, "I did some unauthorised modifications, I can tell you that, to quite a few old Fenders and Silvertones and whatever was left at my house." Which is not to say that "unauthorised" translates to "reckless". By high school, Zaite had already spent much of his childhood from the mid 50s to late 60s receiving electronics tutelage from his TV-repairman father, and experimenting with the piles of tube gear that littered the home workshop. By the time he was messing with his bandmates' amps, he very much knew what he was doing.

Zaite formalised this DIY-style education in university by earning a degree in electronics. Afterwards, he set out on a career working in medical-equipment design and manufacturing for General Electric – "doing sophisticated stuff", as he puts it – and further grounding his skills in an industry where component quality, tolerances, and tight wire runs *really* matter.

All the while, though, the music was still in his heart and that was what he really wanted to get back to. "I always liked amps," he relates, "and started to do some repairs for a lot of friends that were blues players from here in the Cleveland area. And you know how those blues guys are about their amps. They had some great vintage Marshalls and tweed Fenders, so I'd re-tube them and set the bias, nothing fancy, but I got to know them and I was certainly impressed with the tones of these rich-sounding old amps. I got to thinking, 'This ain't so tough. I think I could build something like this…'"



ABOVE The inside view of Dr. Z's Therapy model – a 35-watt cathode-biased 6L6 amp with the character of a low-powered tweed Twin

HELL FREEZES OVER

In 1988, Zaite launched Dr. Z in grand style, if not to any major fanfare, by building an amp for Joe Walsh, which the guitar star immediately took out with the Eagles on the band's fabled *Hell Freezes Over* tour. Zaite had known Walsh from the Cleveland scene and retained a close acquaintanceship with his manager, David Spero. Mike had little trouble getting an amp into the artist's hands after noting one of Walsh's precious Vox AC30s had gone up in smoke on a live MTV performance. Whether or not the Eagle would like the creation, though, was another matter.

"I knew Joe's tech," says Zaite, "and I got a call from him: 'You know, Z, Joe brought in that amp you made and he was carrying it in his arms like a baby. He said: 'A friend of mine made this for me, and I want to use this on the tour.' And the rest was history. Not that it did a whole lot for me financially, because tickets were $185 a seat for that tour and it went to about six or seven shows!"

Even if the tour didn't sell a lot of amplifiers for Dr. Z, it proved to Zaite that he had something in

ABOVE Mike Zaite has been building hand-wired amps since 1988. His creations are available in the UK from peachguitars.com

these amps of his, and inspired him to push forward with the effort. Just a decade later, Dr. Z was one of the best-respected names outside of the major manufacturers, and had secured a stellar reputation within the industry.

YOU CAN'T ZAP THE PATIENT

Anyone who's spent time admiring the inside of a Dr. Z chassis will note the marriage of fluidity and simplicity that merges with quality components to produce a robust and toneful whole. These remain among several 'first principles' in the Z camp, and there are others still inherent in his designs and builds that retain roots in Zaite's medical-equipment experience.

"I guess I did kind of bring several things with me into some of my designs from my background in medical electronics," Zaite says. "And, as unfancy a subject as it might be, I certainly put a lot of work into my chassis designs. I use 90-thousandths aluminium chassis, and I chromate-dip them for increased conductivity. It really does make a very breathable, alive base for the amp to be built on.

"And it's a very good grounding platform," he adds. "One thing with doing CT scanners or MRI scanners, a lot of time, patients are on some type of life support system or respirator or whatever while they're being scanned, so there can't be any ground currents, you know? You can't zap the patient while you're trying to take a picture of them."

Other hallmarks of the Z ethos include seeking out just the right component for the job and maintaining a consistency from amp to amp, as much as possible – both of which have occasionally required going to great lengths to secure suitable parts.

"One thing that I think does help my amps is the coupling capacitors," Zaite relates. "The company that makes the old Orange Drops now, SBE, they're way out in Maine somewhere and what I ended up doing was formulating an older-style cap that was no longer in production, as they had moved on to faster and more powerful caps. I kind of liked the sound of an older-style cap that they made, so I had them build them for me in large lots, so that eliminated deviation from amp to amp, because these caps were all built the same day, and they all had extremely high tolerances.

"I didn't have to say: 'Why does this amp sound a little brighter, or a little darker, or a little harsher?' So these are the old Sprague 417-type caps, and they're polyester, not Polypropylene like the newer Orange Drop caps are. To me, they're a little more like the old yellow Astrons that sound so wonderful in original tweed Fender amps."

COUNTRY COUSINS

Dr. Z segued into the Nashville market in grand style in the late 90s when budding Tele-meister Brad Paisley purchased a stock Dr. Z Mazerati in 1999, and he and Zaite collaborated on the fast, responsive Prescription Extra Strength model shortly thereafter. Since then, Zaite and Paisley have collaborated on three further official releases, including the Stang Ray (intended to re-create the EF86-driven channel of Paisley's prized early AC30), the Z Wreck (inspired by Ken Fischer's Trainwreck amps), and another pentode preamp design – this time using a 5879 tube – dubbed the DB4 (Doc & Brad #4).

Given such star approval, the Dr. Z brand has proliferated in the country market in general, where other boutique amp makers have often struggled to make inroads. As Zaite puts it: "A lot of guys that I talk to in this industry don't even try to pursue that area, and I say: 'That's fine, leave it for me!' The country players today are a little different. They're not playing Peaveys anymore. They're going for a more modern kind of tone and they like to experiment, too. And man, they're *great* guitar players – and they like to buy stuff!"

A fifth collaborative effort between Zaite and Paisley bloomed in 2018 in the form of a Dr. Z recreation of a rare early Vox AC100 head that the artist had fallen for, but which could be troublesome on the road because of the excessive heat produced by its four EL34 output tubes.

"Being cathode-biased," says Zaite, "unlike the later fixed-bias AC100s that were more common, it probably puts out only about 80 watts, but it sounds fantastic. The key to the thing, though, was the output transformer. That is the real heart of the tone of most vintage amps. And I just happened to

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© Karen Ollis

ABOVE Mike Zaite got into amp building by making "unauthorised modifications" to Fenders and Silvertones left in his Cleveland practice room

"TODAY'S CUSTOMERS NEED GREAT SOUNDING LOW-POWERED TUBE AMPS, EITHER DUE TO THE VOLUME POLICE – OR AT HOME, TO ENSURE DOMESTIC TRANQUILITY"

be talking to an engineer at [transformer makers] Heyboer while working on this thing for Brad, and he said: 'Oh, I've got that OT in my files! I had an early AC100 in here a few years ago, so I blueprinted the transformers.' I finished building the thing and plugged Brad into it, and he was floored. He loved it."

So far, the big 80-watter has only been available in limited numbers as Master Builds constructed entirely by Zaite himself, although there could be scope for a wider release in the near future. Meanwhile, however, Zaite's artist-signature focus is trained on another model: the new Z-Master, designed to emulate the original '59 tweed 3x10 Fender Bandmaster combo that Joe Walsh gave to Pete Townshend in 1970. That amp, along with a late-50s Gretsch 6120 Chet Atkins Hollow Body guitar, quickly became *the* sound of Townshend's guitar on The Who's '71 album *Who's Next* and much of his work after… yet its loss had long haunted Walsh.

"Joe said to me: 'Man, that was such a great-sounding amp, I never should have given it to Pete Townshend!', ha ha!" Zaite tells us. "So I studied the originals and the schematics and the parts, and started putting an amp together. And once again, the key to it was in the output transformer. It's a 4-ohm Triad transformer feeding an odd 2.7-ohm load from the three 10-inch, 8-ohm speakers wired in parallel, and it's a huge part of that amp's sound. And yet again, I had this huge stroke of luck: I contacted my guy at the current Triad company, and he said: 'Oh yeah, I've got the specs for that one here in my files!'"

CARE IN THE COMMUNITY

While never straying from his original design and manufacturing standards, Zaite has still had to adapt to a lot change in the amp industry over the course of 30 years. "Today's customers need great-sounding low-powered tube amps," he tells us, "due to the volume police, either at a small club or at home, to ensure domestic tranquility. It is a feat to create big-sounding amps at whisper volume levels, but that's what they're asking for."

One way he's getting there is by way of a new half-power circuit that has been installed on many of the Dr Z. amps with four output tubes. "I'd say I have had great success with it, because I see other builders using it on their amps. It is a true half-power circuit that does not alter or change the amp's tone, only cuts its output power exactly in half."

Another of current players' demands is seen in the need for built-in effects loops that don't colour or alter either the effects' sounds or the amp's core tone, and here Zaite has found an out-sourced solution: Metro Amps Zero Loss Effects Loop boards. "This is a brilliant design by George Metropoulos that drops in, works on high voltage, and supplies a perfect connection for effects in an amp. This board is also used by many other amp builders as the standard for effect loops."

For all the kudos he's received for his own work, Zaite also admires worthwhile new creations by other amp makers; any of whom might otherwise be regarded as 'competitors'. "For the most part," he says, "it's a pretty small world, and we tend to support each other, those of us who have been around a while, at least. I've been really impressed by the work of Mark Bartel, for example. His new line demonstrates a very unique building technique that generates a wonderful-sounding original amp.

"The designs by Steve Carr are very original, too, while still traditional in their warm tones. His new Telstar is unique in its use of different paired output tubes to achieve a very original sound. And Todd Sharp is another original designer with his JOAT line. Todd's approach and keen ear make for very original amp that satisfies the most discerning professional."

You'll hear a lot of admiration reflected right back on Mike Zaite and his Dr. Z brand, yet this senior member of the community remains ever humble regarding his own abilities. "I'm not any kind of genius designer," he says, "I'm no Ken Fischer or Alexander Dumble. But I'm a solid engineer and I'm a good builder. I can research a new idea, and I can figure out how to do it right."

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THE RUNDOWN

SIGNATURE PEDALS

WORDS JOSH GARDNER

Signature gear is about more than just guitars, and signature stompboxes often offer a much more affordable route to the tones of your heroes. Here are some of the best…

JHS THE AT+

1 Instrumental virtuoso Andy Timmons first started out using JHS's Angry Driver in 2013 and after chatting with founder Josh Scott, this became the original AT overdrive pedal in 2016 (sometimes called the '@'). The AT offered searing overdrive and distortion tones with EQ and 'Air' (effectively a presence control) to sculpt the sound, and a clever 25- 50- or 100-watt switch to alter the compression and headroom. The AT+ adds an extra footswitchable boost channel, making it hugely versatile.

THORPYFX THE DANE

2 A collaboration between UK boutique builder Adrian Thorpe and YouTube star and session maestro 'Danish Pete' Honoré, The Dane is an overdrive/boost that wrings a surprisingly large dollop of tonal flexibility out of its five controls. At its heart, The Dane is a low-to-mid-gain overdrive pedal that could sensibly be described as 'amp like', with plenty of warmth and transparency. Things get really fun when you kick in the boost, however, which takes you on a direct train to classic-rock nirvana.

WAY HUGE SMALLS OVERRATED SPECIAL

3 Designed by Way Huge main man Jeorge Tripps in collaboration with Joe Bonamassa, the OS is effectively a reimagined version of the classic Green Rhino overdrive pedal, but tweaked to the blues-rocker's taste and with an additional frequency control that offers boost or cut around the low-mid frequencies. With stylings that nod playfully to the most sought-after boutique amps of all, it's perhaps Joe's most fun and universal signature pedal.

MXR EVH PHASE 90

4 The pairing of Eddie Van Halen and the MXR Phase 90 is one of the most iconic pairings of artist and pedal in rock history, so it's entirely fitting that the man himself gets his own version of the phaser. The EVH Phase 90 is an updated version of the original he used to such great effect in the late 70s and 80s, featuring a 'Script' switch to tweak the sound between modern and classic Phase 90 flavours, and then of course there's that 'striped' paint-job to set it apart from its orange siblings.

WAMPLER PAISLEY DRIVE

5 Country star Brad Paisley knows exactly what he needs from his guitar tone, as his affection for Crook Custom Guitars and Dr. Z amplifiers attests, and it's no different when it comes to pedals. The Paisley Drive was created in close collaboration with Brian Wampler to create a Tube Screamer-type overdrive that offers that classic 808 sound and more besides. With the addition of presence and contour switches plus true bypass switching, it's every bit the versatile, high-end overdrive.

MALEKKO CHARLIE FOXTROT

6 As you can see from the bulk of the entries here, signature pedals tend to focus on replicating an artist's preferred flavour of dirt, but Dandy Warhols guitarist Peter Holmström and noise specialists Malekko have gone for something much more eccentric. A granular delay mixed with a digital buffer and looper, the Charlie Foxtrot can generate everything from warped tremolo-style burbles to glitchy chaos.

MXR DOOKIE DRIVE

7 Sometimes a signature pedal does exactly what it says on the tin, and MXR's new Dookie Drive, created with Green Day frontman Billie Joe Armstrong, is exactly that. If you're a guitarist who has long wanted to capture the classic pop-punk overdrive tones that Armstrong squeezed out of his rig on the seminal 1994 album, this stompbox is where it's at.

KHDK GHOUL SCREAMER

8 KHDK is more than just a signature pedal, it's an entire brand created by Metallica guitarist Kirk Hammett. Recruiting Czech pedal-designer extraordinaire Antonin Salva, KHDK has created a number of pedals that mix spooky graphics with high-end boutique tones. The Ghoul Screamer is Hammett's personal take on a TS-style circuit, with a whopping five switches designed to tighten up and boost your metal tones.

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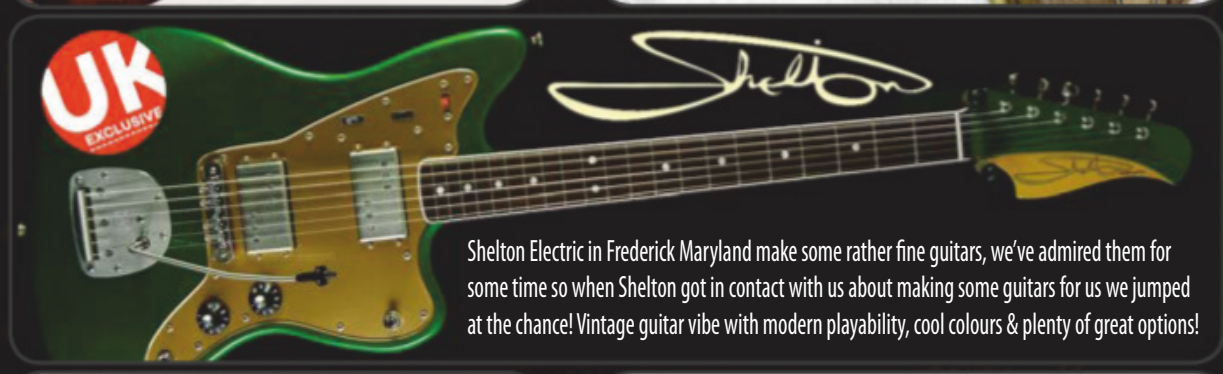

Shelton

Shelton Electric in Frederick Maryland make some rather fine guitars, we've admired them for some time so when Shelton got in contact with us about making some guitars for us we jumped at the chance! Vintage guitar vibe with modern playability, cool colours & plenty of great options!

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REVIEWS

CONTENTS

090 SHEERAN BY LOWDEN W02 & S04

096 STERLING BY MUSIC MAN ST. VINCENT HH

100 GRETSCH G6659TFM PLAYERS EDITION BROADKASTER JR

104 ORANGE TREMLORD

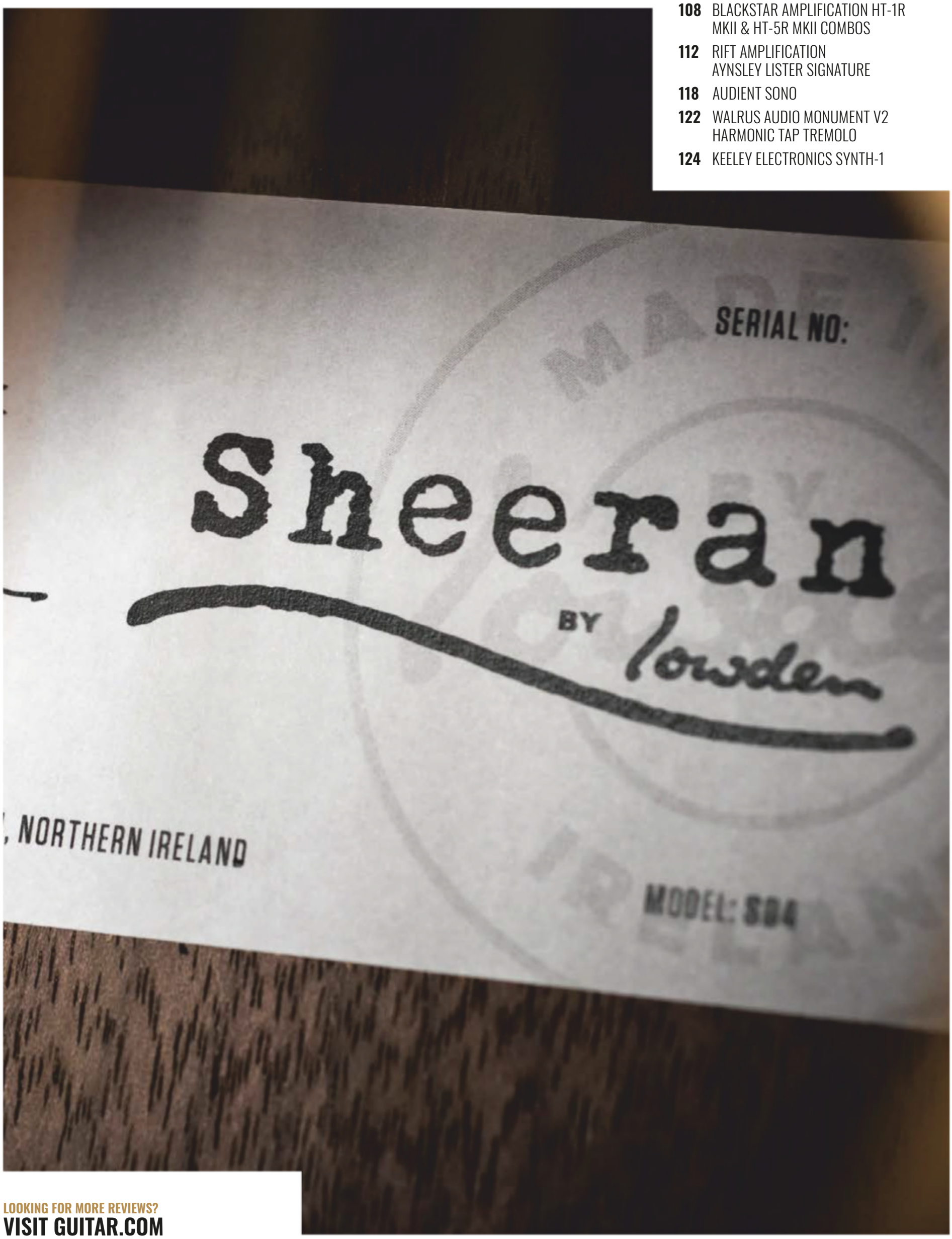
108 BLACKSTAR AMPLIFICATION HT-1R MKII & HT-5R MKII COMBOS

112 RIFT AMPLIFICATION AYNSLEY LISTER SIGNATURE

118 AUDIENT SONO

122 WALRUS AUDIO MONUMENT V2 HARMONIC TAP TREMOLO

124 KEELEY ELECTRONICS SYNTH-1



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LOWDEN

SHEERAN BY LOWDEN W02 & S04

WORDS HUW PRICE

Lowden teaming up with Ed Sheeran on a new range of affordable acoustic instruments was the biggest story of NAMM 2019. We check out a pair of guitars from the new signature brand…

The Sheeran by Lowden range is intended to give Ed's legion of fans an affordable, high-quality instrument

Ed Sheeran's first Lowden was a gift from his friend Gary Lightbody of Snow Patrol. It was a relationship between player and guitar that got off to a good start – Sheeran used it to write five songs on his 2014 album *x*, which has since sold over 14 million copies.

George Lowden would later develop a unique small-bodied guitar for Ed that would become the Wee Lowden production model. As the friendship developed between one of the world's finest luthiers and its biggest pop star, the pair began hatching a plan to produce a high-quality instrument accessible to young, aspiring acoustic players.

Rather than go for a luxurious signature line with exotic tonewoods and exquisite inlays, Ed has lent his name to a series of Lowden-designed models that are stripped down, affordable and perhaps most surprisingly, made in Northern Ireland. The Sheeran by Lowden range comprises four S (small body) and four W (Wee Lowden) models, and for the purposes of this review, we've got our hands on one guitar from each series.

In order to hit the sub-£1,000 price point, these instruments were never going to match Lowden's tour de force woodworking and marquetry standards, but the simplified build displayed here retains the characteristic precision and crispness, in part thanks to aerospace technology. The only decoration you'll see, however, are the seven-piece wood rosette rings and there are no purflings, bindings or inlays at the tail.

Similarly, the one-piece mahogany neck construction and stacked heel are far more conventional than Lowden's usual laminated style. The headstock shape is the same, with 'Sheeran' inlaid and 'by Lowden' etched beneath in smaller lettering. Truss-rod access is behind the nut and wood truss-rod covers match the headstock veneers, which in turn match the back and sides of each guitar.

The top-loading bridge design is also unchanged, though a single saddle is used rather than a split saddle, and the saddle itself isn't shaped to optimise intonation. The most significant departure from a full-fat Lowden is the use of five-ply laminates for the back and sides. The company certainly hasn't skimped on the quality of the outer veneers, because the grain impresses. This is particularly true of the S04 model, with its highly figured walnut.

The S04 and W02 both feature solid Sitka spruce tops with Lowden A-Frame bracing, and their thinness is exaggerated by the absence of binding and Lowden's usual double layering around the soundhole. The W02 has Santos rosewood back and side laminates and none of the W Series models are available with a cutaway. In contrast, the S Series models come in cutaway and non-cutaway guises, and three of the four models have a forearm bevel on the lower bout.

Both the bridge and fretboard are made from solid ebony and these may be the first guitars Lowden has produced with visible fret ends. Happily, that doesn't equate to a lowering of standards and the fret dressing and polishing impresses.

The forearm bevel on the lower bout is a touch of luxury at this price point

The guitars are optimised for live performance, as evidenced by their factory-fitted strap buttons

An LR Baggs Element VTC pickup system is fitted to both review guitars, with volume and tone controls located just inside the soundhole.

It's a standard fitting throughout the S and W Series, with the exception of the entry-level W1 and S1 models. All Sheeran by Lowden guitars come with a heavily padded gigbag – appropriate for a range bearing the name of a musician who virtually lived out of his own gigbag during his early gigging career.

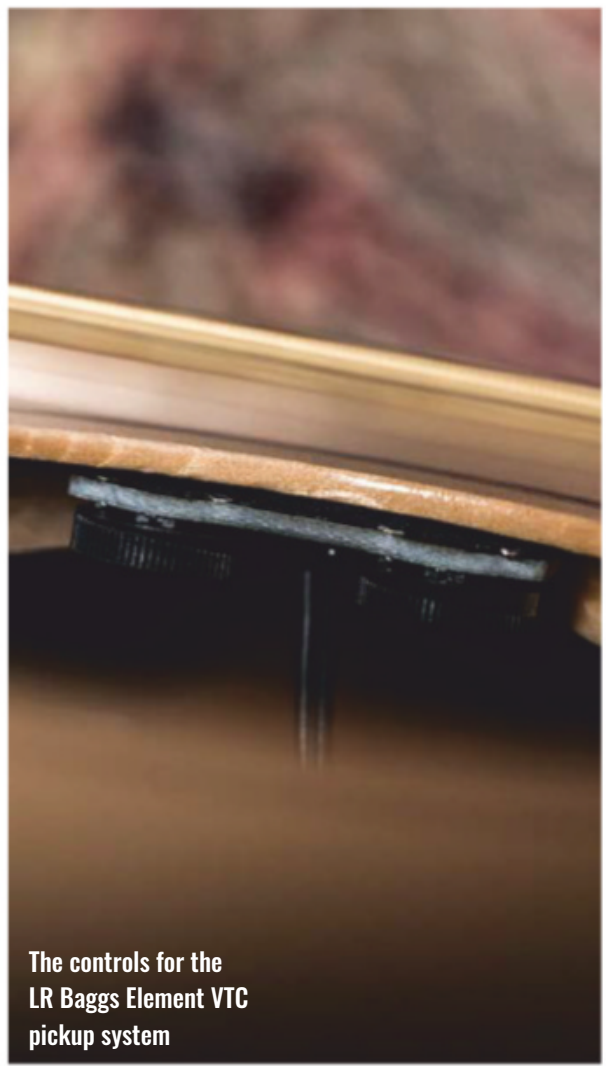
IN USE

Something immediately striking about both these guitars is the way they feel exactly like holding a Lowden. The visual vibe is much the same and the neck profile feels unaltered. It's a smart move – after all, many of the potential customers for Sheerans will be those who can't yet afford a full-priced Lowden. If your entry-level option doesn't have a decent playing feel, a bad impression may linger and potential customers of the future may be lost.

Starting small with the W02, we are taken aback by the overall balance and punchy response. An acoustic with this body size cannot produce deep bass, but the low strings certainly have sufficient power and the treble doesn't overwhelm the bass.

There is a pleasant dryness to the tone that favours the fundamental frequency of a note, but there are plenty of harmonic overtones to keep things interesting. Inevitably perhaps, there's a slight boxiness to the midrange, but that's par for the course with small acoustics and we find it adds to the W02's charm.

Some may notice a lack of sustain, but that actually works to the W02's advantage when it comes to intricate Nick Drake-style fingerpicking patterns and percussive rhythm playing. Given its size, the volume this guitar produces is quite an achievement. That said, it's no effort to sing along as you're playing and you won't need to push your voice to get heard. In other words, it's an ideal tool for travelling songwriters.



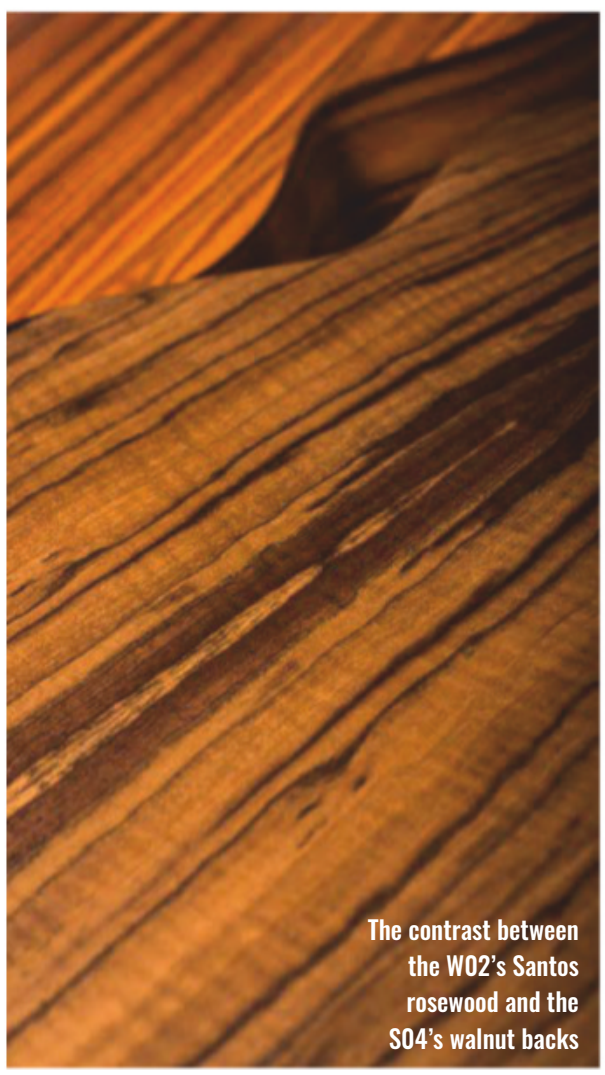
The controls for the LR Baggs Element VTC pickup system

Since there are no back braces, and the S04's body is about 4cm wider, the back's tap tone is noticeably lower in pitch. It's no wonder then, that the larger-bodied guitar has bass with more gravitas and no trace of boxiness in the mids. While the S04's tone may not be as characterful as the W02's, it's more recognisably 'Lowden' in its DNA.

Now the midrange is less prominent, harp-like treble and ethereal harmonics we associate with the Lowden brand breathe more freely. It might be somewhat predictable, but it would be remiss not to explore DADGAD in a Lowden review. Where the W02 gets bluesy, the S04 comes over all Celtic and the low-end holds together particularly well.

Again, the bass is far from earth-shaking, but it's deep and solid enough, and the S04 certainly retains its balance in dropped tunings. We also find it has a greater depth of tone and complexity than the W02 – so much so that we have to double check that the body really is laminated.

Of course, any concerns about bass response go out the window when you plug in. The LR Baggs system can produce ample low end and more than sufficient treble, so both of these guitars can sound like jumbos. That said, for its look, the cutaway and its acoustic tone, the S04 would be our choice.



The contrast between the W02's Santos rosewood and the S04's walnut backs

Guitar EDITOR'S CHOICE

KEY FEATURES

W02
PRICE £750 (inc. padded gigbag)
DESCRIPTION 6-string acoustic guitar. Made in Northern Ireland
BUILD Solid Sitka spruce top with laminated Santos rosewood back and sides, one-piece mahogany neck, ebony bridge and fingerboard, Santos rosewood peghead overlay, 14th-fret neck join, diecast tuners, Tusq nut and saddle
ELECTRONICS LR Baggs Element VTC
SCALE LENGTH 610mm/24"
NECK WIDTH 43.6mm at nut, 54.6mm at 12th fret
NECK DEPTH 20mm at first fret, 21.5mm at 9th fret
STRING SPACING 35mm at nut, 54mm at bridge
WEIGHT 1.9kg/4.1lb
LEFT HANDERS No
FINISH Satin body, semi-gloss neck
CONTACT Sheeran by Lowden sheeranguitars.com

8/10 **Effortless to play, full of sonic character and sports a fine pickup system**

KEY FEATURES

S04
PRICE £965 (inc. padded gigbag)
DESCRIPTION 6-string acoustic guitar. Made in Northern Ireland
BUILD Solid Sitka spruce top with laminated figured walnut back and sides, cutaway and soundbox bevel, one-piece mahogany neck, ebony bridge and fingerboard, figured walnut peghead overlay, 14th-fret neck join, diecast tuners, Tusq nut and saddle
ELECTRONICS LR Baggs Element VTC
SCALE LENGTH 630mm/24.8"
NECK WIDTH 43.5mm at nut, 54.4mm at 12th fret
NECK DEPTH 20mm at first fret, 21.5mm at 9th fret
STRING SPACING 36mm at nut, 54.7mm at bridge
WEIGHT 1.9kg/4.2lb
LEFT HANDERS No
FINISH Satin body, semi-gloss neck

9/10 **Visually and sonically, this is every inch a Lowden for the short of pocket**

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STERLING BY MUSIC MAN
ST. VINCENT HH

WORDS CHRIS VINNICOMBE

New for 2019, Annie Clark's affordable signature model gets a pair of full-size humbuckers and a choice of candy-store colours

Music Man's St. Vincent signature model is one of the most important and striking artist collaborations of recent times. The USA model launched in 2016, followed in 2017 by an Indonesian-made Sterling version that costs about a third of the price and mirrors the triple-humbucker spec of the original. The Music Man St. Vincent HH arrived a year later, while NAMM 2019 saw the Sterling equivalent served up in HH configuration and classic Daphne Blue and Fiesta Red hues.

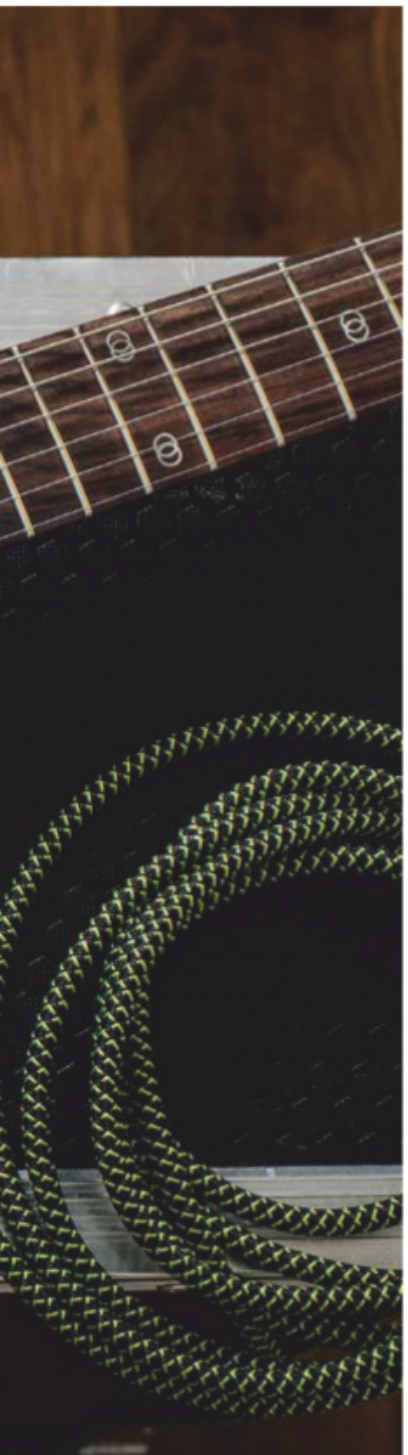
It says something about the pervasive cultural influence of the 1950s American automobile that so many of the colours originally developed for that industry (well before finding their way onto Californian guitars) still appear utterly contemporary in 2019.

Without wishing to reignite the debate about the 'Flamingo Pink' finish on Hank Marvin's legendary Stratocaster – how much time have we got?! – we've seen 'Fiesta Red' finishes more orange or pink in tone than this, but the important point is that the poly shade chosen here looks simply fantastic applied to the retrofuturist lines of Annie Clark's signature guitar.

The distinctive body shape was inspired by Music Man's angular Albert Lee electric, Clark's old Harmony Bobkat, mid-century modernism, Japanese designs of the 1970s and the work of Russian avant-garde artist Kazimir Malevich, among others. Although the shape has more angles than it does curves, the ergonomics are almost as gloriously comfortable here as they are on the USA models.

41mm deep at its centre, the body thins out dramatically on the rear of the bass side, where a huge, 50s-Strat-style scoop acts as a ribcage/belly contour. When played seated or in the relatively high strapped-on position that Clark prefers, it's very comfortable indeed. An arm resting on the angled forearm chamfer helps counteract the slight neck-heaviness of our review sample.

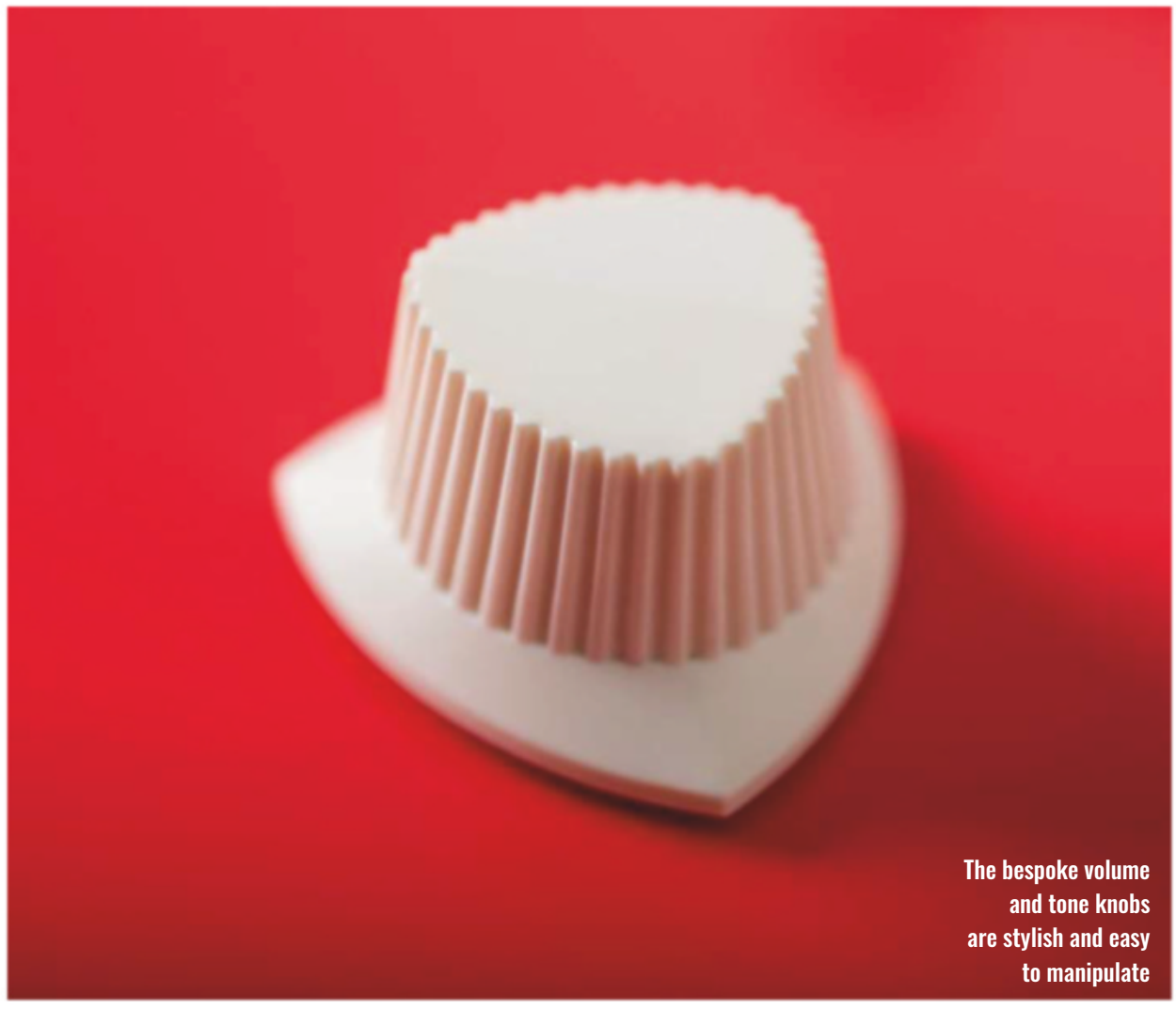
Despite the disruptive nature of the body design, unlike some other 'shape' guitars, acquainting yourself with the St. Vincent HH doesn't require a period of adjustment. Don't understand what we mean? When playing a reverse-body Firebird it can initially feel like everything has shifted a couple of inches off to the left. In contrast, this is definitely a 'home' fixture, with everything in its right place.



Alnico humbuckers offer power and clarity while avoiding sterile cleans

KEY FEATURES

PRICE £799 (inc gigbag)
DESCRIPTION Solidbody electric guitar. Made in Indonesia
BUILD Mahogany body, five-bolt hard maple neck with dual-action truss rod, 9.5" radius rosewood fingerboard with custom inlays, 22 medium-jumbo frets
HARDWARE Locking machineheads with pearloid buttons, 2-point vibrato bridge with bent steel saddles and push-in arm
ELECTRICS 2x Sterling By Music Man-designed humbucking pickups, volume, tone, 5-way blade selector switch (neck, inner coils, both pickups together, outer coils, bridge)
SCALE LENGTH 25.5"/648mm
NECK WIDTH 41.8mm at nut, 51.5mm at 12th fret
NECK DEPTH 20.1mm at first fret, 23.1mm at 12th fret
STRING SPACING 35.5mm at nut, 54mm at bridge
WEIGHT 3.39kg/7.48lb
LEFT-HANDERS No
FINISH Fiesta Red (as reviewed), Daphne Blue
CONTACT Strings & Things
stringsandthings.co.uk, sterlingbymusicman.com



The bespoke volume and tone knobs are stylish and easy to manipulate

Although we don't get a roasted figured-maple neck finished in Music Man's gunstock oil and wax blend on the Sterling model, the neck certainly doesn't feel like an area in which corners have been

trimmed to hit a price point. A gloss finish on the peghead gives way to a satin sheen behind the nut and the soft-shouldered, medium-depth profile is an instant winner – the edges of the rosewood fretboard feel very lightly broken-in, too.

Along with the dual-action truss rod and locking tuners, it's a detail that you don't see every day on a £799 guitar, but there are some areas in which the guitar's pricing is palpable. Unlike the bespoke geometry of the parchment-coloured scratchplate around the front, or the stylish three-cornered control-knob design that's easy to manipulate in sweaty onstage or rehearsal conditions, the rear control and vibrato-cavity plates are 2.5mm black plastic, and mismatched.

The vibrato plate at least has a bevel, but the control-cavity plate has square edges that have been left with a rough look and a sharp feel. There's also no screw at the corner nearest to the jack plug, which means that part of the plate can be lifted away from the guitar's body relatively easily. It's a shame that an instrument that's the product of so much consideration, and has such an elegant appearance when viewed from the front, has a whiff of the parts bin around the back.

Nevertheless, despite arriving with an overly spacious neck pocket and a first (high E) string that sails a little too close to the fretboard edge, an acoustic workout reveals that this is a guitar with lively harmonics, bags of sustain and an even decay. Time to search for our coolest-looking cable and plug in…

The 4+2 headstock is topped off with custom graphics

A gloss finish on the peghead gives way to a satin sheen at the back of the maple neck

IN USE

Although it's a specification seen on countless hot-rod guitars, it can be difficult to get a pair of regular humbuckers to sound good in a Fender-style bolt-on. Too much heat and you end up with drab and undynamic cleans, not enough body and overdriven tones are nasal, rather than vocal. No doubt the mahogany body and bent-steel bridge saddles here are playing their part, but even though our review guitar turned up without any height adjustments made to the humbuckers' screw coils, the St. Vincent HH has the balance of power and clarity just right.

Users of dense fuzz or lots of ambience – such as Annie Clark, for a start – will appreciate the way the treble response stops everything turning into inarticulate mush, but it's equally useful for breathing life into more traditional classic- and alternative-rock overdrive tones. Outside of the versatile full-humbucker voices in positions one, three and five, position two's combination of the outer coils has springy, Telecaster-like tones in abundance, while position four's inner-coil combo has a Gretsch-like jangle with an almost semi-acoustic character.

Set flat to the body with no upbend, Sterling's 'Vintage Tremolo' is anything but. Huge bar dips return to pitch accurately every time, which encourages us to go way beyond our usual Bigsby or Stratocaster shimmers into much more inventive territory. There's something about this guitar that encourages experimentation and musicality, and we like it a lot. **G**

8/10 **Stellar feel and tones – just a few manufacturing tweaks away from greatness**

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GRETSCH
G6659TFM PLAYERS EDITION BROADKASTER JR

WORDS HUW PRICE

Another new Gretsch designed to deliver at high volume without compromising on character… does this compact and flamey semi sound as good as it looks?

For many years, if you wanted a slice of the Gretsch sound and aesthetic, then your options were limited to large, full-hollow archtops or compact single- or double-cut Jets. Happily, in recent times, the company has provided a variety of 'best of both worlds' solutions in the form of scaled-down Jr models and guitars equipped with feedback reducing, and sustain enhancing, centre-blocks.

Part of the Players Edition range designed with the modern working professional in mind, the G6659TFM Broadkaster Jr's 14-inch body has a slim, 335-like depth of 44mm and is built around a spruce centre-block that runs its entire length. Spruce is a light wood, so it's able to provide extra sustain and feedback resistance without making the guitar restrictively heavy.

The centre-block also provides a firm foundation for the B7CP String-Thru Bigsby, while the Adjusto-Matic bridge sits on threaded posts that are screwed into the body. This Gibson-style bridge-mounting method may break with Gretsch tradition, but it's coupled to the body more effectively and it will stay put regardless of how hard you play.

When it comes to electronics, here we have another variation on Gretsch's deceptively simple and practical approach to guitar controls. In a sense, it's back to the Dynasonic era of the 1950s, as there's no 'mud' switch – the Broadkaster Jr has a master volume on the cutaway horn and a single three-way toggle pickup selector.

The other knobs comprise individual pickup volume controls and a master no-load tone control. With the tone control set wide open, the signal bypasses both pot and capacitor, but knocked back from the notched position, it behaves like a standard control. On compact bodies such as this, Bigsby vibratos can restrict access to controls, so the easy-access master-volume placement is one of Gretsch's finest ideas. However, if you prefer, you can simply ignore it and use the individual volume controls instead.

Again, Gretsch has turned to Fender's in-house pickup guru Tim Shaw. Earlier in his career, Shaw reverse engineered vintage PAFs for Gibson with highly

Tim Shaw-designed Full'Trons sit midway between Filter'Trons and Broad'Trons in the output stakes

KEY FEATURES

PRICE £2,479 (inc. hard case)
DESCRIPTION Semi-hollow electric guitar, made in Japan
BUILD Laminated flame maple single-cutaway body with spruce centre block, set maple neck with standard 'U' profile, bound ebony fingerboard with 12" radius, 22 medium-jumbo frets, Graph Tech Tusq XL nut
HARDWARE Gotoh locking tuners, Adjusto-Matic bridge, Bigsby B7CP with String-Thru loading
ELECTRICS 2x Full'Tron pickups, individual pickup volume controls, master volume, master no-load tone, 3-way toggle pickup selector
SCALE LENGTH 625mm/24.6"
NECK WIDTH 43mm at nut, 52mm at 12th fret
NECK DEPTH 20mm at first fret, 23mm at 12th fret
STRING SPACING 35mm at nut, 50.8mm at bridge
WEIGHT 3.2kg/7.1lb
LEFT HANDERS No
FINISH Gloss urethane Bourbon Stain (as reviewed), Dark Cherry Stain
CONTACT Fender EMEA gretschguitars.com

impressive results, and he's recently been heavily involved with the R&D on several high-profile Fender launches. We were impressed with Shaw's Broad'Tron pickups on the Players Edition Jet, so we're naturally keen to try his Full'Tron humbucker design on this guitar.

According to Gretsch, Full'Trons slot in between Filter'Trons and Broad'Trons in output level, with more midrange and growl than the former and a touch more definition than the latter. Here, they're set quite deep in the body, because Jr models have a shallower neck angle than vintage Gretsch archtops.

Gotoh locking tuners provide another modern twist and the keys look similar to the Sperzels favoured by Brian Setzer. Besides quick string changes, locking tuners are also supposed to improve tuning stability for vibrato-equipped guitars – so long as the string wraps don't exceed a single turn around the tuner posts when they're at concert pitch.

Gretsch made orange iconic with the 6120. The shade varied throughout the 50s and 60s, and many of the earlier Dynasonic-loaded examples with the Western trimmings have a darker, burnt amber look. If it was Gretsch's intention

The master volume's location ensures access isn't restricted by the Bigsby vibrato arm

Flamed maple features on the headstock and the body's front, back and sides

to replicate that look for the Broadkaster, it's done a fine job of it with this Bourbon Stain. Ditto the flamed maple, which isn't confined to the front and the headstock. It's equally vivid on the back and sides and the combination of the stain and the gloss finish makes this one the most eye-catching modern Gretsch designs we've seen.

There's multi-layer body binding front and back, with single-layer binding around the f-holes, headstock and ebony fingerboard. Aged pearloid thumbnail markers are the appropriate choice for humbucker-loaded Gretsches and, like the finish, the overall quality is top notch. As much as we love vintage Gretsches, Terada's construction standards are higher than Brooklyn's ever were and you get the Gretsch charm without the quirks – or indeed the occasional comedy.

Having said that, of late we have noticed that Bigsby arms are getting rather sharp around the edges, and the one on this guitar is a case in point. Under adrenaline-fuelled gigging conditions, it could prove hazardous. And although they're all properly seated and there are no playability issues, we think the fret ends should be better dressed on a guitar at this price.

IN USE

The centre-block is wide as well as long, but despite leaving little room inside the body, the Broadkaster has a fabulously resonant unplugged tone. It sounds much bigger than it actually is; the response is deep and full, but also has a natural chime and clarity and serious sustain.

The pickups are exactly as described and they couldn't be mistaken for anything other than Filter'Tron variants. They're hotter and brighter than vintage Filter'Trons, but it's as if Tim Shaw has found a way to turn up the metaphorical volume rather than undertake a re-voicing.

The bridge combines chime with a quacky growl and more than a modicum of twang. The neck provides fine contrast, with a far sweeter and more rounded character. Frequency response is very even and there's a more neutral and hi-fi quality. Again, though, the tone is bright and there's no shortage of definition on the low strings.

The Broadkaster Jr covers traditional ground, but at higher volume levels – it also interacts equally well with amp and pedal overdrive, where the natural sustain and rich harmonics come into their own.

Our review guitar perhaps needs a little breaking in, because we struggled with tuning stability and the tuners aren't the smoothest. Otherwise, the set-up is near perfect and the Broadkaster is so easy and addictive to play. In all other respects, the guitar as good as it looks – a near-perfect amalgam of classic and modern Gretsch appeal that's easier to handle than its larger-bodied siblings.

8/10 Great looks, fabulous tone – a beguiling blend of vintage and modern Gretsch

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ORANGE
TREMLORD 30

WORDS CHRIS VINNICOMBE

Guitar EDITOR'S CHOICE

Is cleanliness next to godliness in Orange's new high-headroom, tremolo-equipped combo?

British guitar and bass amplification specialist Orange has widened the scope of its catalogue in recent years to include a range of stompboxes, an acoustic preamp and more besides. Although the 30-watt, 1x12 TremLord 30 has all the trappings of the other rockin' amplifier designs to come from the mind of Orange's technical director Adrian Emsley, this is no Dual Dark or Thunderverb. You might even say it's apples and Oranges…

This writer spent the early 2000s gigging with single and dual-channel Orange AD30s and although the rich chime of those amps delivered some of our absolute favourite live tones, there were drawbacks. Favouring the spread of an open-back 2x12 over the laser focus of a closed-back extension cabinet, the combo was our preferred choice, but dragging a 33.3kg beast up a pub staircase was no fun whatsoever. How we longed for a 1x12 version, preferably with spring reverb… but it never materialised.

Fast-forward to 2019 and news of Orange's latest launch piqued our interest, to say the least. An EL84 combo with a single 12-inch speaker, with spring reverb and a tube tremolo circuit that has two footswitchable speeds, the TremLord also features four power settings. Onboard attenuation has become a staple of modern Orange circuits and the ability to switch between 30-, 15-, two- or one-watt modes offers greater flexibility than our Oranges of old, which needed to push a fair bit of air before hitting their sweet spots.

In addition, the presence of a solid-state rectifier rather than a GZ34 suggests the TremLord will offer a less spongy platform for modern pedal lovers, while the effects loop sits after the tremolo and before the reverb and is a fully buffered, low-impedance design driven by a 12AT7 valve.

There's also no master volume control. "It's actually quite a clean amp," Adrian Emsley says of the TremLord. "It will get some hair, above halfway to three quarters. Flat out, it'll definitely get some hair, but it never gets really dirty. It's got a lot of clean headroom." This is also assisted by the 200-watt Lavoce speaker. The Italian company is better known in the pro-audio world, but the 12-inch driver here is described by Emsley as "a great all-round speaker".

"There's been nothing thrown at this speaker that it hasn't lapped up," he continues. "It really works great for this amp because of the clean headroom. Although it's only a 30-watt amp, it has

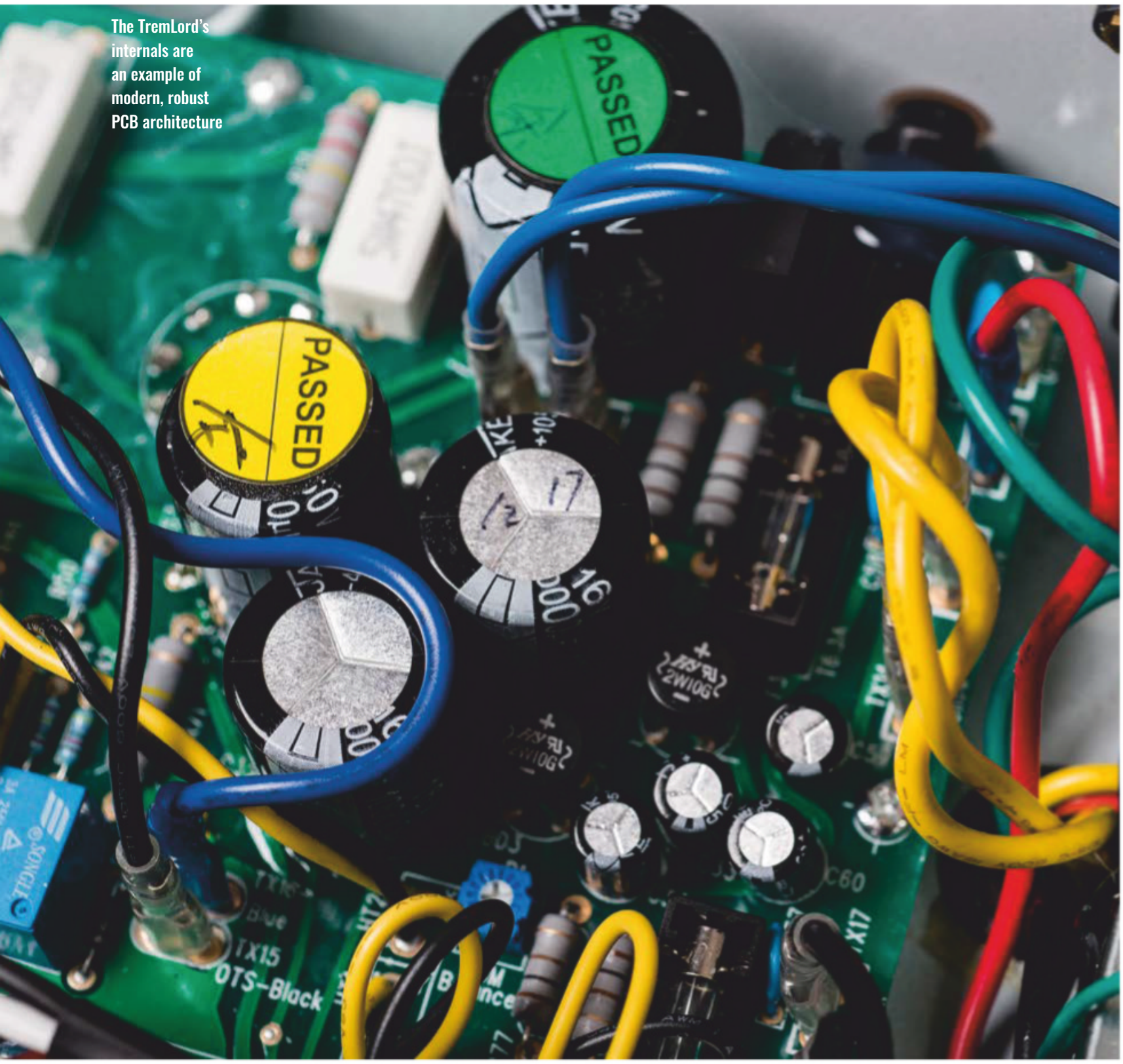
Headroom and Bedroom modes provide between one and 30 watts of output power...

KEY FEATURES

PRICE £999
DESCRIPTION 1x12 valve guitar combo amplifier with two-speed tube tremolo and spring reverb. Made in China
POWER RATING Headroom (30/15 watts) and Bedroom (2/1 watt) modes
VALVES 2x 12AT7, 3x 12AX7 (preamp), 4x EL84 (power amp)
CONTROL PANEL Instrument input, volume, bass, treble, tremolo speed, tremolo speed (only engaged with footswitch), tremolo depth, reverb level, bedroom/headroom/standby mode switch, power on/off switch
REAR PANEL 2/4 output-valve switch, 3x speaker outs, 3x individual footswitch inputs (tremolo on/off, tremolo speed, reverb on/off), FX send and return
SPEAKER 1x 12" 200W, 16-ohm Lavoce speaker
DIMENSIONS 570 x 460 x 285mm
WEIGHT 24kg/53.1lb
OPTIONS Black cosmetics also available, footswitch not included
CONTACT OMEC orangeamps.com

...in conjunction with the switch around the back for two or four output valves

more perceived clean headroom than our other 30-watt amps, purely because it uses a choke, like we use in amps that are 50-watts upwards. It really helps with the headroom but you still get that great EL84 tone."



The TremLord's internals are an example of modern, robust PCB architecture

Construction is every bit as solid as we've come to expect and although it's not as unwieldy as Orange combos of the past, there's still 24kg resting on those wooden skids, so the TremLord isn't going to skitter across the stage. Inside the powder-coated steel chassis you'll find robust, modern PCB architecture, while the power-valve cage and control-panel roll bars provide protection from the rigours of the road.

IN USE

Orange describes the TremLord as "our very British take on the 1950s amplifier", but while its voice is still a long way from Fullerton, it's certainly well into its second movie on the long-haul flight from Heathrow. Happily, while we're pushing this metaphor up through the clouds towards cruising altitude, the TremLord's clean tones are sitting at the front in business class.

Adhering to Orange's 'pics only' tradition, the control panel may be a little confusing for the uninitiated, but from left to right you have volume, bass, treble, two individual tremolo speeds (the second of which only makes a difference with a footswitch plugged into the 'speed' socket around the back), tremolo depth and reverb level.

With the EQ set to tame the low end and add a little sparkle, lots of reverb and a subtle slow tremolo throb creates a beautiful fog in which to get lost. The vibe is decidedly more vintage than recent Orange amps. The company itself recently celebrated half a century in business and, armed with a Custom Shop Strat and an R9, the tones on offer wind back the clock to Peter Green's Fleetwood Mac and the era in which London was swinging and Orange founder Cliff Cooper first opened the doors at New Compton Street.

Adrian was right about this being a clean amp; even in one-watt mode, you can't get much of that 'hair' without pushing the amp beyond neighbour-friendly volumes. It's certainly louder than a whisper, so you'll have to get your overdriven kicks from pedals if you want to practise with high gain at home – although at low volumes, when the speaker isn't working very hard, you may have to tame the trebles to avoid fizz from stompbox overdrives.

That approach is arguably missing the point, as the TremLord's delicious cleans remind you that you don't actually need that much dirt to have fun. Meanwhile, the less-compressed nature of the response compared to a valve-rectified circuit accentuates the differences between rhythm and lead pickups and broadens your palette in the process.

Like all of Adrian's best circuits, the TremLord seriously opens up at gigging volume with a punch and a presence that sits perfectly in a band and provides a solid base for effects as well as delivering the kind of EL84 chime, grit and harmonic complexity we loved the AD30 for in the first place.

It's perhaps no surprise that an experienced musician and audio engineer designs amplifiers that excel in a real-world context, but it's refreshing that, even in

Orange's pics-only control panel includes a second tremolo speed control that comes into play when you connect a suitable footswitch

the YouTube age, amp companies haven't forgotten guitarists who play on pub and club stages. And the various power settings mean that, once you're playing away from home, you can dial in some break-up and tailor your output level to the size of the room very effectively.

The range of the onboard controls, reverb depth and tremolo speed are all well judged too, with even extreme settings yielding usable, musical tones. Is this the amp we wish Orange had made about 20 years ago? It certainly would have made the load-in easier, and helped our drive pedals hit harder in a band mix. Footswitching between two tremolo speeds on the fly might have provided the inspiration for a few songs, too… G

9/10 **Characterful cleans and inspiring reverb and tremolo for creative-minded players**

LIKE THIS? TRY THESE...

Fender '68 Custom Deluxe Reverb **£1,099**, Supro 1696RT Black Magick Reverb **£1,529**, Vox AC30C2 **£749**

The Lavoce speaker is described as a "great all-rounder" by Orange's technical director Adrian Emsley

BLACKSTAR
HT-1R MKII & HT-5R MKII COMBOS

WORDS MICHAEL WATTS

Updated sonics and functionality for a pair of home-friendly amplifiers for beginners and experienced players alike…

There was a great deal to like about the original Blackstar HT-1R and HT-5 amplifiers, with both proving very popular due to their high-quality valve tones and affordability. Launched at NAMM 2019 in January, these new 'MkII' versions not only offer tweaked aesthetics but also new functionality, and sounds that bring them bang up to date.

The first thing we notice when unboxing this brace of combos is that the cosmetic upgrades, while subtle, lend the amps an air of elegance that surpasses their more workmanlike predecessors. Cream chicken-head knobs, elephant-hide-textured tolex and the Blackstar black/white/silver weave cloth all suggest a much higher price-point.

A glance at the control panels reveals that both amps are bristling with size-appropriate features such as different voicings, channel-select options and USB outs for hassle-free digital recording. Like the original models, these updated combos are built around the idea of a low-powered, 'push-pull' power amp which produces the overdrive and breakup characteristics of a more powerful machine.

In order to achieve this, Blackstar uses real tubes: the HT-1R packs an ECC83 and an ECC82, while the HT-5 sports an ECC83 and a 12BH7 dual-triode valve.

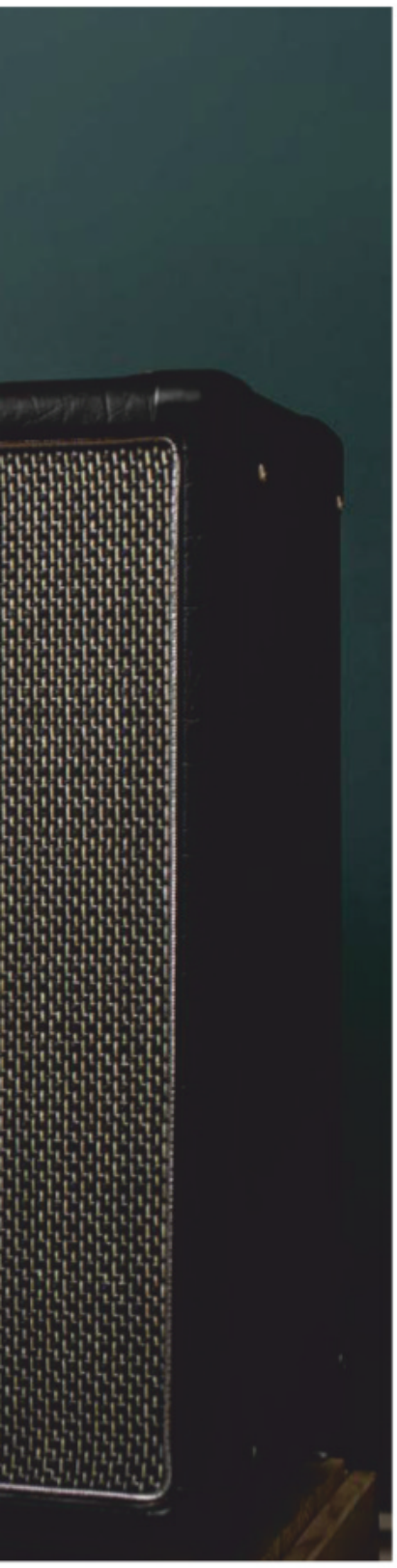
Both amps also feature speaker outs and footswitchable voice and channel controls; however, only the HT-5 comes with a footswitch included in the price. From a practical point of view, the contexts in which you'll be using a smaller amp do make a footswitch less of a must-have and at the affordable end of the market, it makes sense not to compel customers to pay for something they might not need.

IN USE

We begin our session with the diminutive HT-1R MkII and a Strat. Engaging the clean channel and with the volume and reverb pointing at noon, we investigate Blackstar's Infinite Shape Feature (ISF) control knob, which is the only EQ feature of this amp.

For those unfamiliar with ISF, Blackstar claims that it allows you to dial in countless tonal options from USA (left) to UK (right) in seconds. In practice, there is indeed a marked difference between both extremes, with convincing Marshall/Fender flavours and some very pleasing textures in between.

Something that immediately grabs our attention is that this is not a 'small combo' sound, by any means. In fact, the sense that



Chicken-head knobs, a clear layout and accessible ins and outs adorn the HT-1R MkII's control panel

Both amps come into their own when driven, and the HT-5's OD channel has added EQ options

a much bigger speaker is shifting the air around us becomes increasingly pronounced as we dial up the volume. It's almost as though there's some sort of stereo-image-widening wizardry at play, with no hint of the boxiness inherent in many smaller cabinet designs.

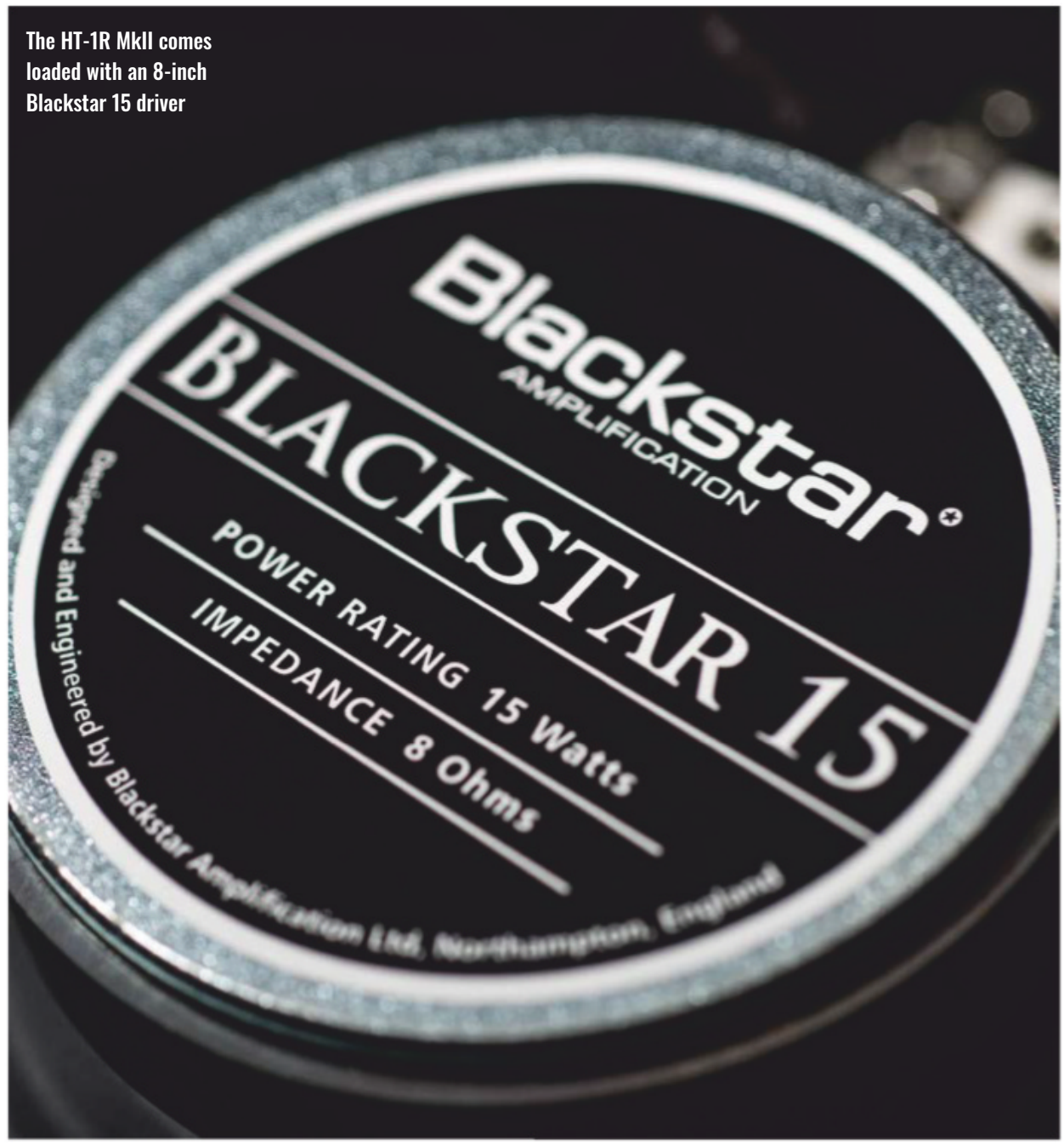
Selecting the OD channel encourages all manner of bad behaviour with a lot of gain on offer. While the heavier tones we find are full bodied and only occasionally fizzy, it is in the truly impressive lower/medium gain settings that the HT-1R MkII proves its versatility as an excellent amp for blues and alternative styles, too. We find some great tones reminiscent at times of Gary Moore/Clapton/Robben Ford and others, albeit in miniature. You could, of course, make use of the handy speaker out to add a cab to your setup.

The HT-5 is cut from the same cloth as its little brother, albeit with an emphasis on increased volume and enhanced tone-sculpting, given its five watts of power and a full complement of bass, middle and treble knobs for the OD section, in addition to the ISF. Once again, we get the same sensation of spread to the sound, implying a much larger amp. The bass response is full and punchy and the detailed, characterful trebles are enhanced – but never swamped – by the newly voiced reverb.

At five real watts, the HT-5 MkII is a belligerent box which could certainly handle studio rehearsals and even (with the DI out) full gigs, at a push. Should the amp's volume prove unruly, you can switch the power to 0.5 of a watt, which takes the volume down to bedroom levels but is no less satisfying as a result. The HT-5 also comes equipped with an effects loop which is great for your delays and other time-based and modulation effects.

Having put the HT-5 through its paces with a variety of different guitars, we remain impressed at how each instrument, from Strat to Supro via SG, retains its inherent character. It's certainly difficult to think of many other amps of this size that offer this amount of versatility – while the

A view inside the HT-1R, with its ECC82 power valve



The HT-1R MkII comes loaded with an 8-inch Blackstar 15 driver

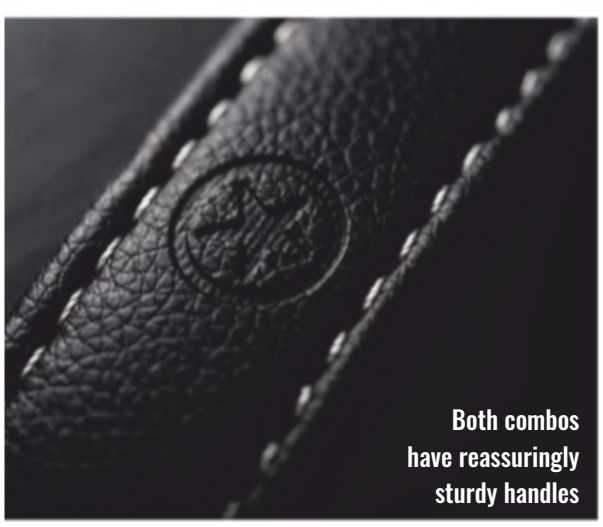
clean sounds are often very pretty on both amps, it's in the filthier regions that we find the most fun.

With so many bases covered from classic rock, blues and indie using the 'classic' voicing, to Sunset Strip precious metal with the 'high gain' voice engaged, the Blackstars pull off convincing sounds in both one- and five-watt contexts. Indeed, the overdrive/distortion timbres available on both amps are so varied and of such high quality that we wonder whether using these amps as a pedal platform would prevent them from playing to their strengths. Further experimentation reveals that hairier fuzzboxes do lose some of their personality through the HTs, but it's a sacrifice we feel is worth making. It's especially heartening to see that both amps feature additional educational functionality in the form of an MP3/line-in and a nifty emulated-speaker/headphone out (mini jack in the case of the HT-1R). Sound quality when jamming to a backing track remains good, with lead-guitar sounds coming through loud and clear.

Hidden around the back of both HT models is a USB out, which we find connects to a MacBook Pro without a hitch, allowing for immediate, high-quality recorded tones. Should you wish to get some actual 'air' in the mix, you could always blend the DI signal with a mic. Yet for demos, scratch recordings or social posts, the quality exceeds expectations.

This updated pair of tubular belles shares much of the characteristics that made the original HT-1 and HT-5 models so popular, with some genuine improvements in both quality of tone and usable, well-thought-out options. There's every reason to believe that the second generation of these amplifiers will prove as ubiquitous as their illustrious predecessors.

8/10 **Updates cement Blackstar's reputation for great sounds, features and price**


Both combos have reassuringly sturdy handles

KEY FEATURES

BLACKSTAR HT-1R MKII
PRICE £295
DESCRIPTION 2-channel combo. Made in China
POWER RATING 1 watt
VALVES 1x ECC83, 1x ECC82
CONTROL PANEL Gain, volume, ISF, reverb knobs, OD select and voice buttons, reverb level
REAR PANEL Speaker out, USB out, MP3 line in, emulated speaker out
SPEAKER 1x 8" Blackstar 15 8-ohm driver
DIMENSIONS 311 x 306 x 178mm
WEIGHT 5.5kg/12.1lb
OPTIONS HT-1RH MkII head version and cabinets available, see website
CONTACT Blackstar Amplification blackstaramps.com

LIKE THIS? TRY THESE...

Marshall DSL1CR 1 **£259**, Vox AC4C1-12 **£324**, Laney Cub 12R **£266**

KEY FEATURES

BLACKSTAR HT-5R MKII
PRICE £489
DESCRIPTION 2-channel combo. Made in China
POWER RATING 5 watts switchable to 0.5 watts
VALVES 1x ECC83, 1x 12BH7
CONTROL PANEL Clean channel volume, tone and voice button. OD channel gain, volume, bass, middle, treble, ISF and voice button, reverb level
REAR PANEL USB out, XLR DI out, effects loop send and return, speaker outs
SPEAKER 1x 12" Blackstar 20 16-ohm driver
DIMENSIONS 441 x 410.5 x 249mm
WEIGHT 12.4kg/27.3lb
OPTIONS HT-5RH MkII head version and cabinets available, see website

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Fender Pro Junior IV **£499**, Marshall Origin 5 **£359**, Koch Amps Jupiter Junior **£439**

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RIFT AMPLIFICATION
AYNSLEY LISTER SIGNATURE

Guitar EDITOR'S CHOICE

WORDS CHRIS VINNICOMBE

After five years of R&D, British blues guitarist Aynsley Lister's quest for "my sound, in a box" has been fulfilled. We get the lowdown from Aynsley and Rift main man Chris Fantana and put the amp to the test…

Like many of the best things in life, it all began with lunch. Aynsley Lister has been a customer of Rift Amplification's Chris Fantana for a number of years, bringing in various pieces of vintage gear for service and repair.

"We started talking about doing a signature amp over lunch one day and what that might look like, what tones it needed to capture," Chris remembers. "Crucially, it needed to offer Aynsley the touch response and feel that he wanted, being one of the handful of guitarists who rarely, if at all, uses pedals."

Initial inspiration for the circuit came from Bletchley, via Switzerland. "Aynsley found a very rare 1979 Marshall JMP 50-watt 2x12 combo, model 2144, in a music shop in Switzerland," Chris reveals. "The 2144 is unique in that it was one of only two Marshall amplifiers from that era to have onboard spring reverb, the other being the 100-watt head, model 2959.

"A few years later, he took it into Marshall for a service and the tech looked at it and proclaimed: 'That's not right, at all!'. It had, as he then discovered, been modified away from the original circuit in the past. Incredibly, these modifications are not that well thought out, nor engineered in a particularly learned way. They were most likely done in a hurry to get the amp working again when it was on the road, using parts available at arm's reach.

"I cannot imagine any circuit designer deliberately choosing to operate the circuit in this way, yet it works wonderfully. When asked if the amplifier should be returned to its factory specification, the answer was of course, no. A/B'd next to a stock 2144, the differences are immeasurable. The modified amp sings in a way that the stock model cannot. The harmonics seem to jump out of the amp with incredible ease, the clean tones aren't that far away from the big-wattage mid-60s Blackface Fenders, yet the overdrive tones certainly nod their head back towards Plexi."

OUTSIDE THE BOX

Chris and Aynsley agreed that using this modified Marshall as a foundation would be an excellent starting point, but there was room for improvement. "I think it's worth pointing out that the modded 2144 isn't the perfect amplifier," Chris says. "We wanted to work on the areas where we felt it could be

Aynsley Lister's signature adorns the front panel

KEY FEATURES

PRICE £2,799
DESCRIPTION 1x12 valve guitar combo amplifier with solid-state rectification and spring reverb. Baltic birch ply cabinet. Handwired in the UK
POWER RATING 35-watts
VALVES 2x EL34 (power amp) 1x 7025, 2x ECC83/12AX7, 1x 12AY7 (preamp)
CONTROL PANEL Instrument input, pre-amp volume (pull bright switch), master volume, treble, middle, bass, presence, reverb, on/off/standby power switch
REAR PANEL Send and return, FX loop bypass mini-toggle, FX level, footswitch input, 8- and 16-ohm speaker outputs
SPEAKER 1x12 75W, 8 ohm Eminence The Governor speaker
DIMENSIONS 610 x 530 x 230mm
WEIGHT 57.2lb/25.9kg
OPTIONS White vinyl also available. Head (£2,599), 2x12 combo (£2,999), 2x12 extension cab (£999) and 1x12 extension cab (£799)
CONTACT Rift Amplification riftamps.com

improved. We noticed that at low volume settings, the amp can become quite bright, so adding a bright switch is a simple yet extremely effective change, along with the added benefit of improving the amplifier's ability to take pedals and therefore be an excellent pedal platform. We also added a switchable series effects loop for users of time-domain effects."

Real-world testing played a huge part in the R&D, with Aynsley "road-testing the life out of" a series of prototypes. "I remember he once phoned me during the interval of a show in Germany to tell me the mids weren't quite right!" Chris laughs. "Whenever he would come to the workshop, we would A/B against his modified 2144 to see if the tone had changed, either for better or worse.

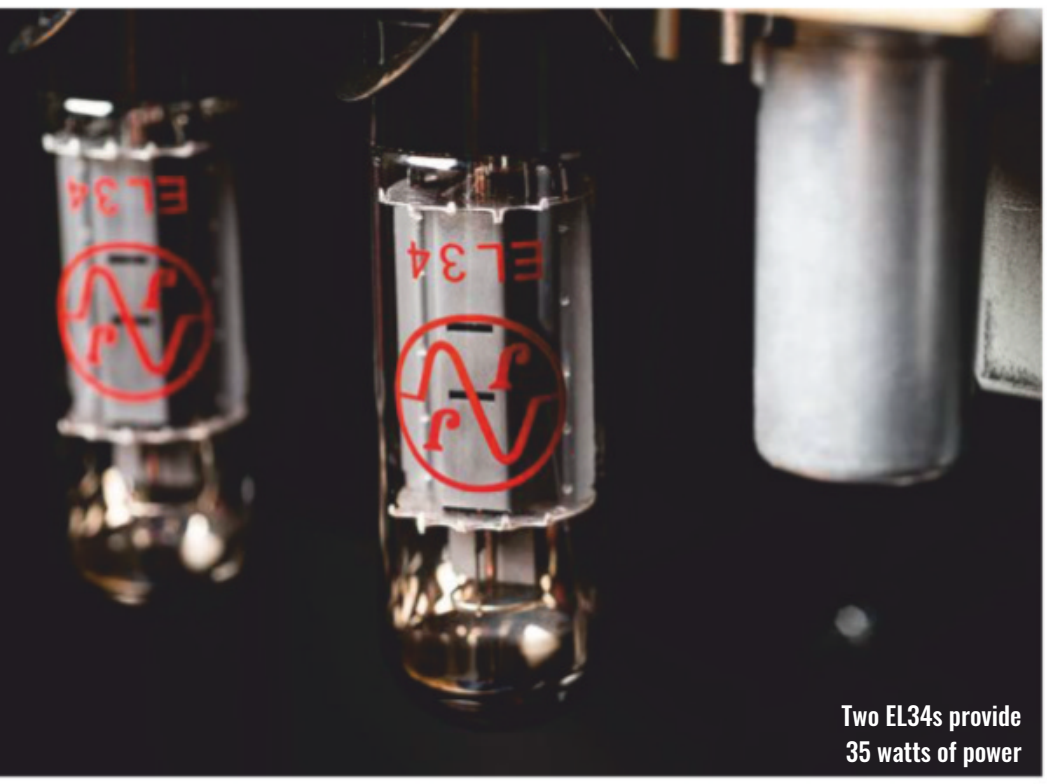
"We spent a lot of time trying various values of resistors and capacitors trying to get the amp to sound and play the way we wanted. Interestingly, the components in the signature amplifier aren't all the same as his modded 2144, yet the tonal signatures are frighteningly similar."

POWER GAMES

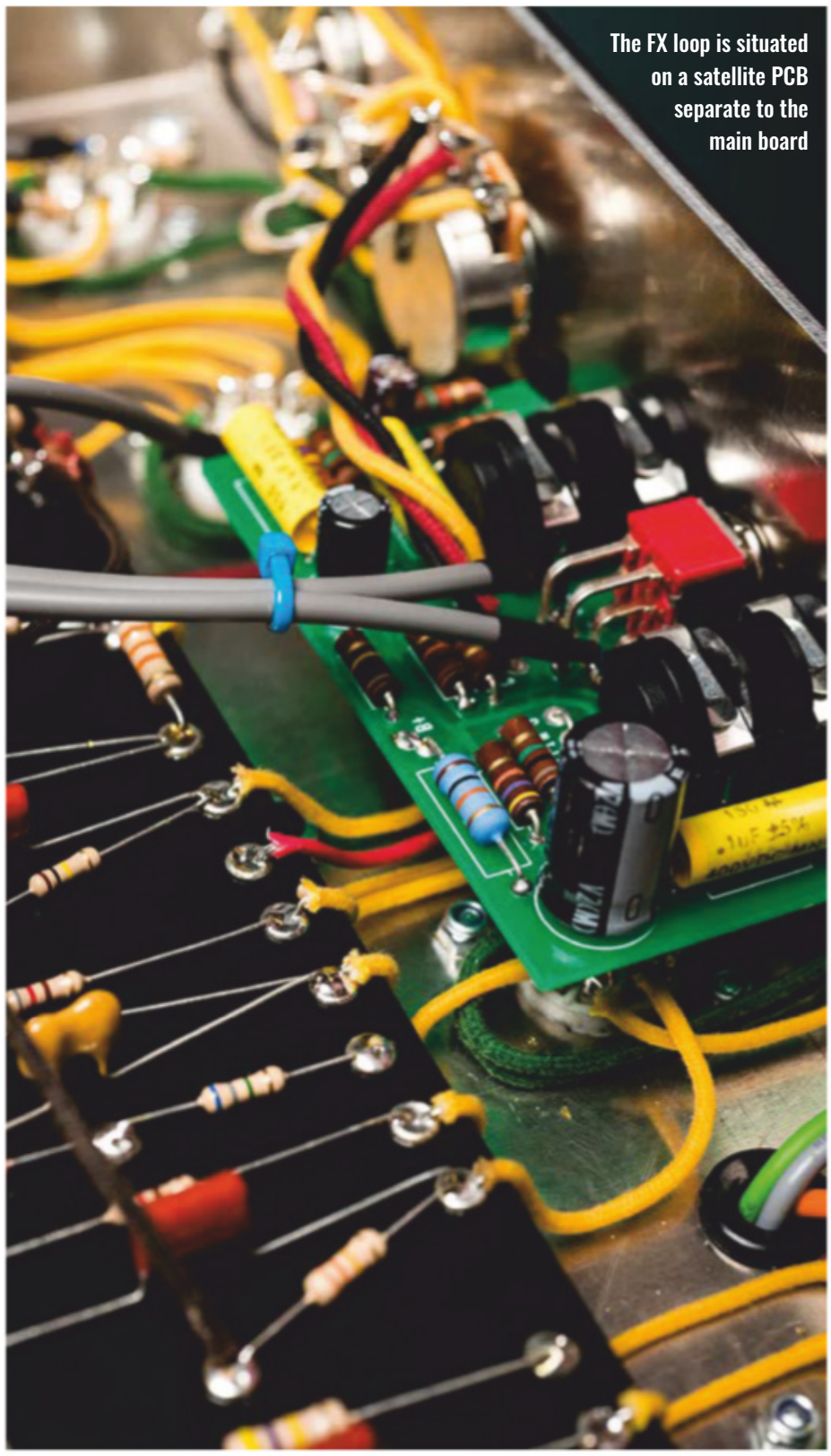
Although the vintage Marshall 2144 is a 50-watt amplifier, Aynsley's signature model is rated at a more practical 35 watts.

The Aynsley Lister is Rift's second original amp design, following the Hawker

The circuit was specially voiced to complement Lister's favourite Eminence speaker



Two EL34s provide 35 watts of power



The FX loop is situated on a satellite PCB separate to the main board

"These days, onstage volumes have been brought down a lot," says the guitarist. "Even in smaller clubs, it's normal now for everything to be mic'd up. Of course, when an amp is cranked, there's lots of things coming into play here – the speakers are shifting some air and maybe compressing a bit, the valves are nice and hot and the whole thing is alive.

"It's always going to be a compromise, but in a lot of venues now, having an amp cranked is just not possible. So I needed to make sure it still sounded good at lower volumes, that it would still sound fat and still have the harmonic qualities and not sound thin at all."

And when it comes to volume, the way the amplifier interacts with the guitar's onboard volume control was of huge importance. "I use the volume on the guitar a hell of a lot to vary between clean, crunch and full-blown overdrive," Aynsley reveals. "A lot of the time, when I'm playing rhythm stuff, the guitar's on about three, for a nice kind of clean tone. And then, when you bring up the volume, it's almost like an overdrive control for me, so I don't want a massive change in volume.

"What I've found with a lot of amps I've tried over the years, when you've got the guitar on full, it sounds great. But as soon as you turn the volume down from 10, the whole thing just falls flat. One of the big things for this amp was to make sure it responds to the volume well."

SURFIN' UK

Aynsley's signature amplifier also features a bespoke reverb circuit that accentuates the mid-Atlantic accent of the modified Marshall from which the Rift design drew inspiration. "I think it fair to say that the West Coast spring reverbs of the 60s are the benchmark," says Chris, "and those from this side of the pond have always lacked somewhat, whether it be depth, space, decay, or they are simply just dull.

"The downside of the Fender reverb is that unless you want the surf sound, you're really limited to no more than three on the dial. I developed a unique reverb circuit for this amplifier using just a single valve, the low-gain 12AY7 usually found in the front end of tweed Fenders. This allows me to send a higher percentage of the guitar signal through the circuit, without overdriving the reverb tank.

"This allows the player to get a huge depth and space across the whole dial range, without ever becoming splashy or getting in the way. We had to design and have manufactured a high-impedance custom reverb transformer, as nothing was available off the shelf that would allow me to under-drive the tank in this way."

A CLOSER LOOK

With a head, 1x12 and 2x12 combos and matching extension cabinets available, there's a format to suit a variety of applications. For the purposes of this review, however, we're taking a look at the 1x12 combo. Echoing the boutique cosmetics of Fantana's other original amp design to date, the Hawker, the black-and-

gold colour scheme here is especially smart in combination with wheat basketweave grille cloth and cream 'cupcake' knobs.

The Baltic birch ply cabinet has been dressed expertly in black textured vinyl (white is also optional) and the build quality is even more impressive inside the chassis. Chris' characteristically orderly wiring sees the lion's share of the components neatly spaced out on one central board, with a satellite PCB purely for the series buffered effects loop.

Cable ties keep everything tidy, and in the unlikely event that anything should go wrong, all Rift amps come with a lifetime warranty for the original owner.

The power valve complement comprises a pair of JJ EL34s, while the preamp features a 7025 dual high-gain triode, a pair of ECC83/12AX7s and a 12AY7. The 7025 is a close cousin of the 12AX7 that was developed by RCA to be quieter and more robust, shortly after the Second World War. "The 7025 low-microphony preamp valve is used in the first two gain stages of the amplifier, sitting either side of the preamp control," Chris explains. "Each stage produces quite a large amount of gain, yet does so in very different ways to help shape the harmonic content of the preamp.

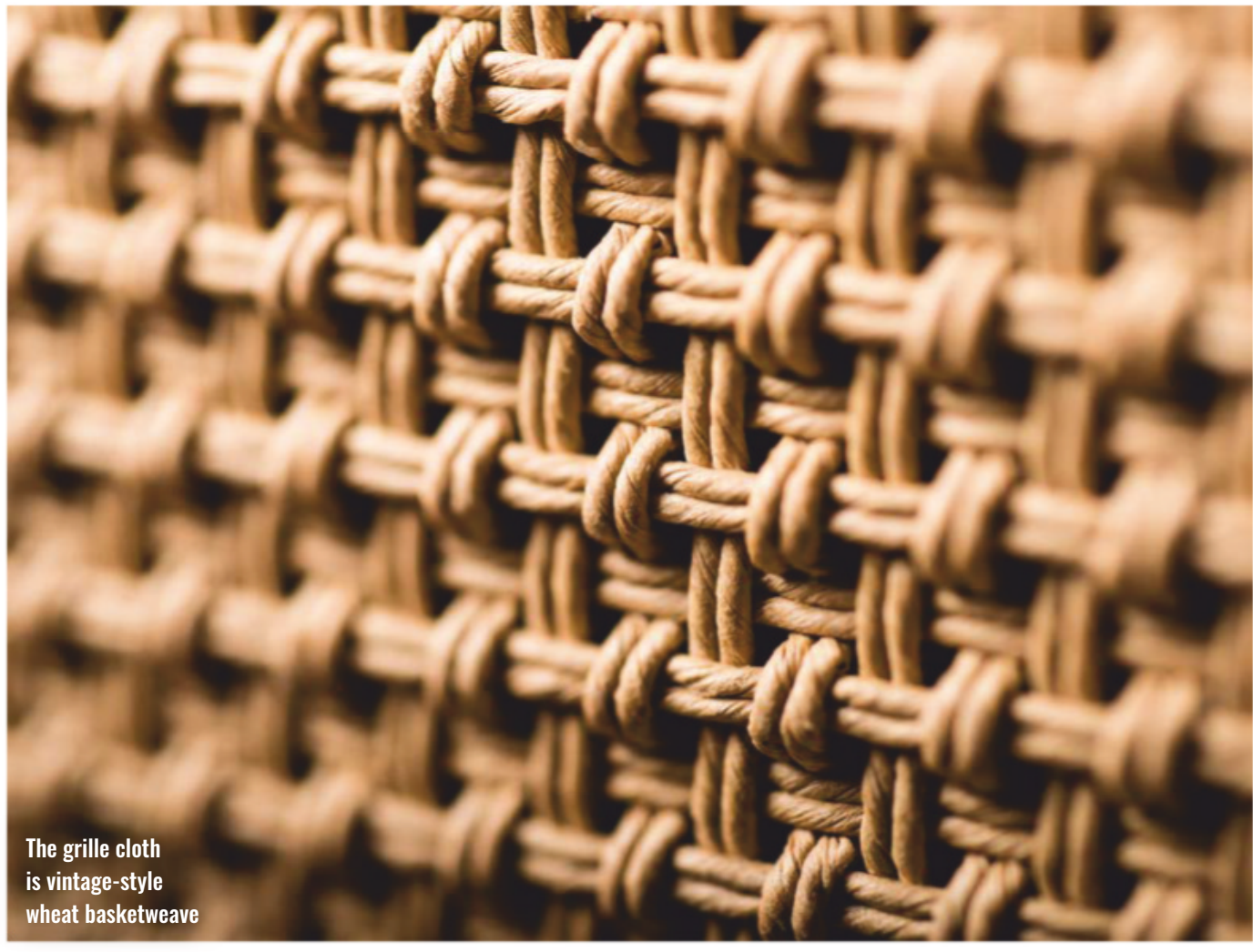
"The idea here is to amplify, EQ, and attenuate the signal as carefully and as controlled as possible so the following stage, the tonestack, can work on the frequencies that we choose without taking away from the unique sound of the amplifier."

Rectification is solid-state and should you crave additional ambience beyond the valve-driven onboard spring reverb, the aforementioned effects loop provides not just quarter-inch send and return jacks, but also an on/off mini-toggle and an FX level control. It's also footswitchable, and can act as a useful additional level boost or cut.

The front panel is all very self-explanatory, with the bright switch accessible via the push/pull pre-amp volume control. The circuit was specially tuned to work with Aynsley's preferred 12-inch speaker, Eminence's The Governor, an efficient 102.3dB ceramic driver that Eminence describes as "a versatile guitar speaker that's great for Southern rock or blues." Time to hear it in action…

HANDS ON

Although Aynsley gets most of his light and shade by riding the guitar's volume control,



The grille cloth is vintage-style wheat basketweave

TALKING TONE

We find out more from Aynsley Lister about the process of collaborating on a dream amplifier…

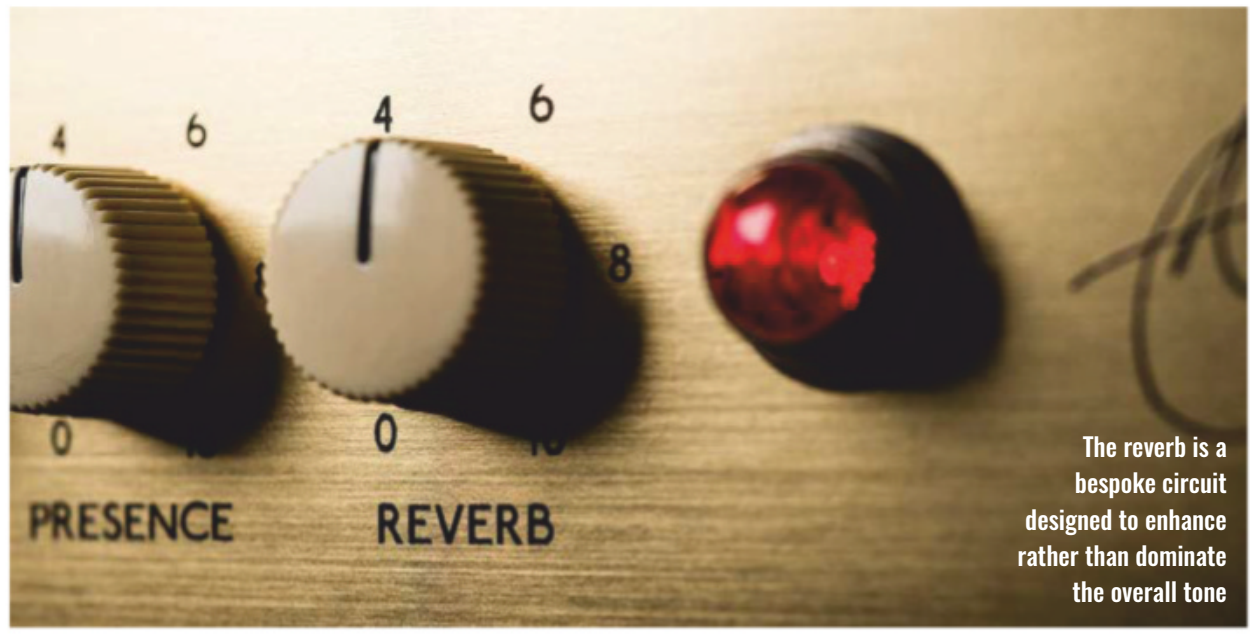
"Working on the amp was really good fun," says the blues guitarist. "Once we'd established a basic starting point and Chris had built it, it was literally a case of days spent tweaking the circuit bit-by-bit. Chris would have the amp chassis on the bench while I played it and he would try things based on my feedback. A bit more this, a bit more that.

"I don't understand the tech stuff too much, so it would be his job to use his knowledge of circuits to get what I was describing. It's not just the sound of the amp either, it's how it responds to your playing, so sometimes trying to describe that wasn't easy. It's one thing hearing it, but playing it is a whole different thing. I'm pretty particular as well, so I'm sure at times Chris felt like pulling his hair out! To his credit, he was very patient and stuck with it – we both agreed once we'd got to the final prototype that it was the best it had ever sounded."

Hear Aynsley play through his Rift signature amp and talk in more depth about the R&D process on *Guitar.com*. To find out when you can hear the amp in action at a venue near you, visit aynsleylister.co.uk

See British blues-rocker Aynsley Lister demo his signature amp on *Guitar.com*

The push/pull pre-amp volume control doubles as a bright switch



The reverb is a bespoke circuit designed to enhance rather than dominate the overall tone

The FX loop can be bypassed using either the rear-panel mini toggle or a footswitch

it's important to emphasise Chris's earlier point that this is an amplifier that's equally valid for pedal junkies.

Aynsley and fellow Brit blues-rocker Chris Buck demonstrated this at the amp's public unveiling at The Guitar Show in Birmingham, back in February. The pair showed how two players with different approaches could make the amplifier sing just as sweetly, whether their lead tones were sculpted by pedals or the amplifier alone.

Back at *Guitar Magazine* HQ, the quality of the guitar playing might not be nearly as stellar as that of either Lister or Buck, but we find instant gratification by plugging straight in, sans stompbox effects, and bathing in harmonically rich, dynamically responsive cleans with a gorgeous halo of reverb that augments rather than dominates. Plug in a decent Strat, flip to the neck pickup and be prepared to lose a few hours – if the Rift just did this and this alone, we'd already be sold.

Switching over to an ES-335, the experience is similarly joyful, and it's also noticeable that Aynsley's comments about how responsive the amplifier is to your guitar's onboard controls ring true, even at relatively clean settings. If you want to roll back your guitar's volume and enjoy noodling around in the onboard reverb at home-friendly levels, you can. Mains hum becomes a little more audible in this context, but it's not intrusive.

Pulling the pre-amp volume control rolls off some highs if they are too much for you, but we find that winding back a couple of notches on our guitar's tone control is more than sufficient, as it retains much of all that lovely harmonic content in the treble frequencies.

Turn up the pre-amp volume and the circuit starts to fatten up; we begin to hear some of the rounder, creamier tones that we heard from Aynsley back at the show in Birmingham. Wind up the wick even more and the amp's vintage British blues and classic-rock DNA is impossible to resist, but your guitar's controls still give you several gears within that realm, with clarity and juicy harmonics intact.

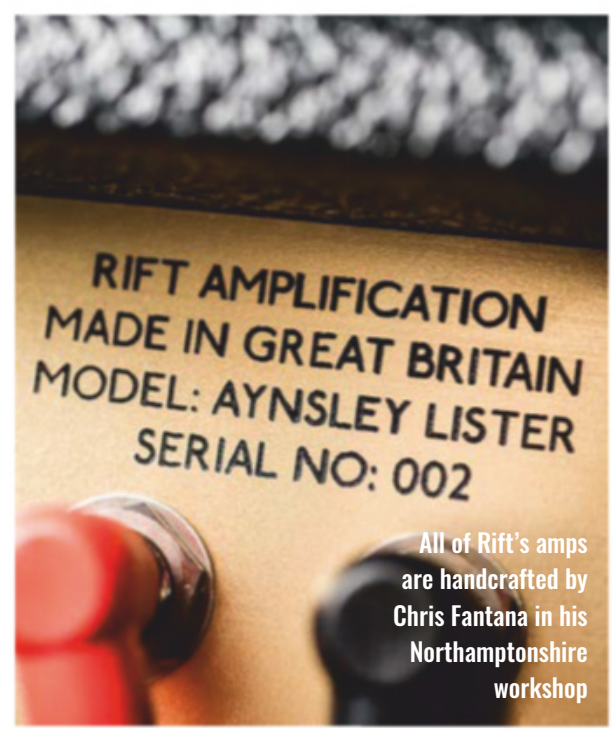
In addition, the level jump from clean to dirty when you ride the guitar's volume is perfect for the transition from raunchy rhythm to singing lead in a band scenario.

Chris and Aynsley have created an amplifier that covers an awful lot of ground, from characterful cleans with a Californian twang, to a trip through late-60s London at the moment when pop got the blues and rock was born. It's even excellent for rootsy Americana, too, which is something that you wouldn't necessarily expect from an EL34-driven circuit. The brief might well have been to deliver Aynsley's sound in a box, but there's plenty of scope here to find your own voice. Impressive.

9/10 **An inspiring and versatile boutique combo with tones that turn heads**

LIKE THIS? TRY THESE...

Friedman Dirty Shirley 1x12 combo **£2,599**, Hamstead Artist 60+RT combo **£2,399**, Victory V40D Duchess Deluxe **£1,699**



All of Rift's amps are handcrafted by Chris Fantana in his Northamptonshire workshop

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ERNIE BALL MUSIC MAN

AUDIENT SONO

WORDS RICHARD PURVIS

British studio brand Audient has teamed up with cab-sim specialist Two Notes to create an all-in-one recording solution for guitar, bass… and pretty much everything else

What's the best way to record electric guitar without disturbing your neighbours? The old method was to buy a 100-watt full stack and play it turned up to 11 until you no longer had any neighbours to disturb, but in 2019 we have a whole host of more civilised options… and the Audient Sono is the latest.

This isn't a preamp for plugging into your audio interface, or a load box for running a real amp's output through virtual speaker cabs, microphones and studio spaces. You could say, though, that it's effectively all of the above – including the audio interface. Connect it to your Mac or PC via USB, and the idea is the Sono will become the hub of your guitar-based home-recording setup.

The hardware includes one input for guitar or bass plus two for mics or line-level instruments, and a pair of outputs for your desktop monitors as well as one for headphones. The software comes from a partnership with the cab-simulation boffins at Two Notes and enables you to tweak your tones onscreen – from switching cab type to adjusting mic distance.

The one thing you're not getting here is modelling of multiple amps. Audient's background is in pro studio gear, and at heart the Sono is all about serious analogue tone – complete with a high-voltage 12AX7 valve – rather than do-it-all digital devilry. But there is a three-way tonestack, plus separate controls for input gain and overdrive… and as we'll see, it's amazing how a change of virtual speaker cab can turn a good sound into a great one.

And it's not all about the home studio. Three software-perfected presets can be saved to the device itself, which can then be plugged into someone else's computer, studio mixer or live PA, or used for jamming with 'phones. This thing doesn't just want to pacify your neighbours – it wants to take over your axe-twanging life.

IN USE

Does the word 'downloads' bring you out in a rash? Or, even worse, make you stop reading product reviews? Relax. There are a couple of them involved in setting up the Sono – one to drive the device itself and one for Two Notes Torpedo Remote, which is where the virtual cabs live. But it's a relatively simple procedure to get hardware and software running together and there

KEY FEATURES

PRICE £419
DESCRIPTION Guitar recording interface. Made in China
CONTROLS Mic channel 1 and 2 gain, speaker, headphone and monitor mix (input/DAW) levels; bass, mid, treble, guitar input volume, drive, output volume; cab preset A/B/C selector button
FEATURES Two mic/line inputs with switchable phantom power, one with switchable valve stage; onboard DSP; simultaneous recording of bypass signal for re-amping, optical input for recording up to 8 channels via ADAT, USB-C input with cables for USB-C and USB-A; powered by 12-volt mains supply (included)
DIMENSIONS 229 x 165 x 67mm
CONTACT Audient audient.com

are both USB-C and USB-A cables in the box. The Sono's core tone is clear, crisp and broadly Fender-ish – and if that sounds a bit vague, that's because the flexibility of this unit brings it closer to a multi-amp modelling experience than you may expect.

The EQ dials are expertly tailored to keep things musical, the drive control offers a decent amount of smooth breakup (and if you want more, it gets on famously with overdrive and distortion pedals)… then, of course, we come to the cab software.

Click on the drop-down menu and you'll be scrolling through hundreds of cabinets of all formats, sizes and speaker types. Don't get too excited, though: most of them aren't available unless you pay to unlock them (€8 each). So if you've already spent all your pocket money this week, it's best to uncheck the 'online' option – then only the cabs you've actually got are listed. Four of these are pre-loaded into the Sono; another 16 come with the software and will be on your computer's hard drive waiting to be called up.

The four installed models are a 2x12 Silverface type, two 4x12s and what looks like a 1x15 Ampeg Portaflex bass cab. They all sound convincing and you can cover a huge amount of tonal ground in both guitar and bass realms with the full set of 20, especially when you factor in the other variables at your disposal – including seven virtual mics, plus a powerful contour control for shaping mids between vintage

(honky) and modern (scoopy) extremes. All this takes place within one of eight modelled spaces, from dead-ish studio rooms to live halls and two different bits of a cathedral. This is a nice idea, but not necessarily as useful as it looks: the resulting reverbs can be quite clangy and oppressive, so we suspect most people will end up keeping the mic distance ultra-short and adding DAW or plug-in reverb later.

Vocals, synths and other instruments recorded through the mic/line inputs sound just as pure as you'd hope, especially when diverted through the valve preamp and its EQ circuit, and there's no reason why you wouldn't be able to use this unit instead of a conventional USB interface.

That just leaves the question of whether you'd want to. When you can get a classy interface like the Focusrite Scarlett 2i2 for a little over £100 and create perfectly good guitar sounds with free software, Audient's offering starts to look like an extravagant use of 400-odd quid.

But as we said right at the start, it's all about options – and for multitasking guitar and bass players who need to flesh out their ideas with vocals and the odd baritone didgeridoo overdub, the Sono and Torpedo Remote are a beautifully designed partnership. **G**

8/10 **A new approach to recording guitars that scores highly for tone**

LIKE THIS? TRY THESE...

Laney Ironheart IRT-Studio **£396**, Mooer Preamp Live **£340**, Tech 21 Blonde **£185**

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MONUMENT V2 HARMONIC TAP TREMOLO

Guitar EDITOR'S CHOICE

WORDS MICHAEL WATTS

Here's a multi-faceted tremolo from one of the USA's leading boutique builders, inspired by the otherworldly sandstone formations of Monument Valley. Time to saddle up…

The atmospheric shudder of tremolo has inspired guitarists of all genres for over half a century. In the form of the DeArmond Tremolo Control launched in the early 1940s, it was the first commercially produced guitar effects unit, and tremolo evidently continues to inspire – take a glance at the inventories of pedal makers large and small, and you'll doubtless find numerous variations on the theme.

Here in 2019, there are hundreds of tremolo pedals on the market, offering wildly differing levels of sophistication, from Cro Magnon to Cape Canaveral – and this updated version of Walrus Audio's Harmonic Tap Tremolo veers sharply toward the latter, promising a wide range of textures and functionality to explore.

Rate, depth and volume knobs make up the bare minimum for a tremolo pedal these days, but as well as these, the Monument sports shape and div controls, a side-mounted expression/tap pedal input jack, two footswitches (bypass and tap) and a harmonic/standard mini toggle switch, enabling access to the pedal's two voices.

IN USE

Experimentation with the standard/harmonic switch quickly reveals the Monument's versatility. Like a vintage Blackface Fender amp, the Standard voicing is based on a sine wave, and in this case much of that lush, evocative sound is reproduced very effectively. Harmonic tremolo, however, is still pretty rare in pedal form, offering grittier textures familiar to owners of old Fender Brownface amplifiers. Selecting this voice embellishes both chordal and single-note work with beautifully nuanced, almost phased movement.

The thoughtfully provided shape knob enables the player to exercise, or indeed relinquish, control over the waveform used. While sine and square settings are commonplace (albeit well executed), the Monument offers more esoteric delights in the form of ramp (think Leslie speakers), lumps (think lumps…) and the eponymous Monument setting, which is a random combination of all of the above.

Divisions on offer are quarter, triplet, eighth and 16th notes, offering a level of functionality rarely seen in tremolo pedals

Used with an external expression pedal, the momentary bypass switch unlocks the unit's wilder side

KEY FEATURES

PRICE £225
DESCRIPTION Harmonic/standard tap-tempo tremolo pedal. Made in the USA
CONTROLS Vol, div, rate, shape, depth knobs. Bypass and tap switches. Harmonic/standard mini-switch
FEATURES External expression pedal/tap-tempo functionality. Momentary bypass switch
DIMENSIONS 64 x 52 x 120mm
CONTACT FACE face.be, walrusaudio.com

The division knob sets the multiplication factor used to multiply the tempo set by the tap switch. While this level of functionality is common on delay pedals, it's rarely seen on tremolos. The divisions on offer are quarter, triplet, eighth and 16th notes, which should meet all but the most demanding tremolo-based expectations.

The Monument's input and output jacks are mounted in a pedalboard-friendly manner on the top of the enclosure, making room for an expression-pedal input socket. While this could be used for an auxiliary tap-tempo switch (you have to flick a switch inside the pedal enclosure to do so), it's difficult not to see that approach as a bit of a shame compared to the world of temporal happiness that opens up when you add an expression pedal.

It's certainly interesting to note that on the previous, larger, iteration of this pedal there were jack sockets catering to both of these options.

Any perceived compromise, however, is readily forgiven when we discover that any of the Monument's five knobs can be assigned to an external expression pedal – as opposed to simply the rate, as on the first version. This welcome addition, in conjunction with the momentary bypass switch, grants instant access to some extremely high-quality textures, from subtle shimmers to ray-gun screeching and extreme, chaotic throbbing. Nice. G

9/10 **A sophisticated take on tremolo, with boutique quality to match**

LIKE THIS? TRY THESE...

Chase Bliss Audio Gravitas **£299**, Supro Tremolo SP1310 **£229**, Fulltone Custom Shop Supa-Trem2 **£255**

KEELEY ELECTRONICS
SYNTH-1

WORDS RICHARD PURVIS

Fresh from the secret lair of boutique-stompbox overlord Robert Keeley comes a Moog-inspired monophonic synth with some hidden tricks

Don't people like guitars any more? We seem to be riding a wave of new synth pedals designed to make guitars sound more like something with keys, knobs and a nerd standing behind it. And now Robert Keeley, godfather of independent effects makers, has joined the fray with a monophonic synth of his own.

There are three waveforms to switch between – square, sawtooth and sine – plus variable attack time for slow volume swells, and a Chaos switch to make note-tracking less stable. You also have the option of blending in some of your clean signal.

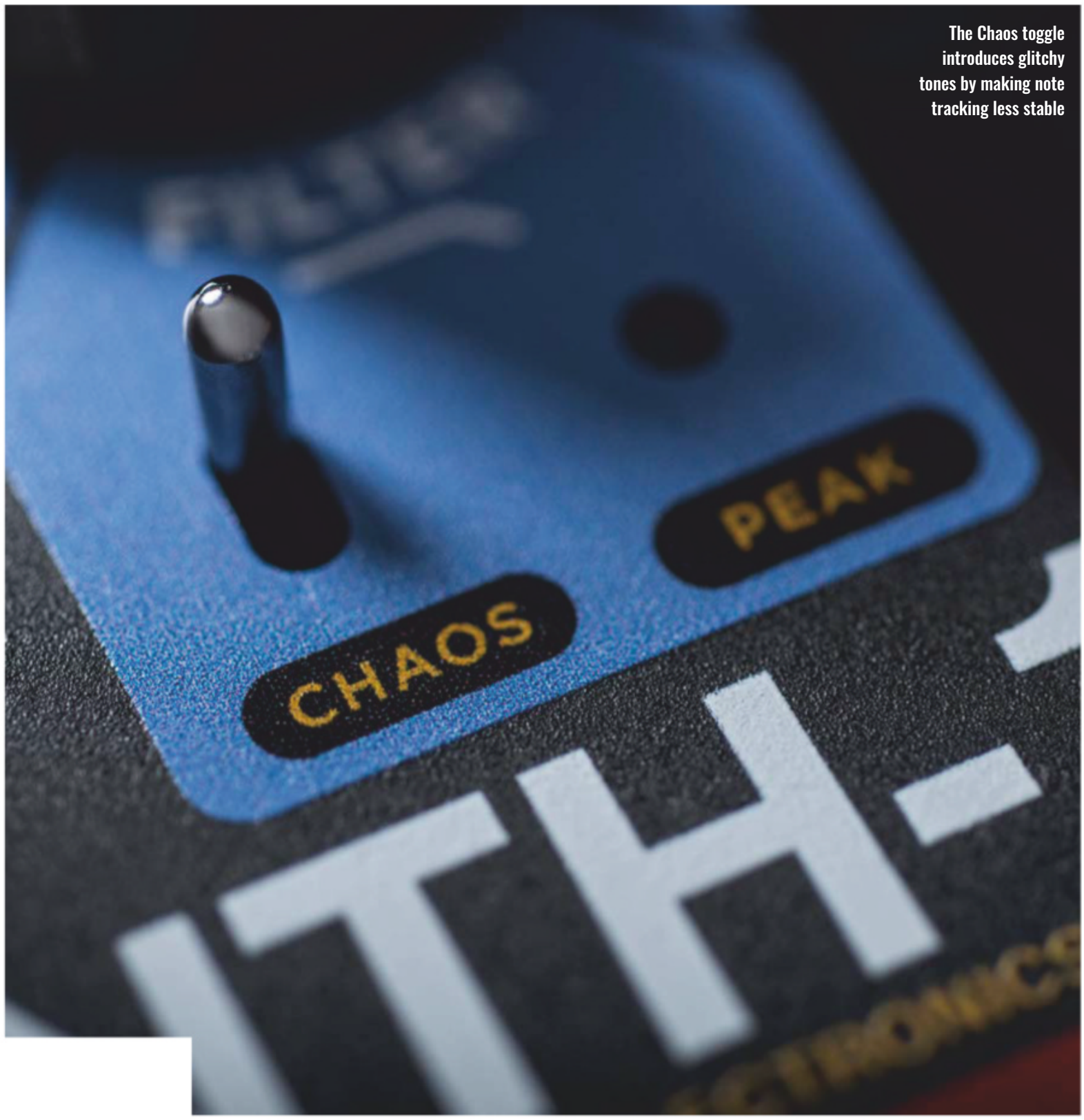
There's an outsize filter knob that you might just be able to manipulate with your foot in mid-solo for those classic wah-like analogue synth sounds; and the Synth-1 also has an input for a TRS expression pedal on the side. The in and out sockets are both at the top; and as this is a digital device with a stated power consumption of 70mA, we're not surprised to see it's mains only.

IN USE

We kick off with the blend control set to all-synth and attack at full for the quickest possible response – and the most striking thing is how different the three waveforms sound. With the filter cutoff frequency set to halfway, our square-wave tone is harmonically rich and very grainy, especially on the wound strings, and plays an octave down from the input signal; the sawtooth sound is more fuzzy and pinched, and back at original pitch; and the sine-wave effect is more plummy and pure than either of them, with a pronounced portamento slide between notes.

What they all have in common is an almost infinite sustain, effectively holding full volume until the input signal coughs out completely, and solid tracking that only really loses its way when you get up beyond the 12th fret. It's all very Moogy, and tweaking the filter control opens up a whole world of nothing-like-a-guitar textures, especially if you're able to ride it with an expression pedal.

The Chaos switch doesn't quite unleash the slavering hounds of sonic apocalypse, but it does make everything that bit more glitchy and unpredictable – and, in sawtooth mode, adds a Hendrix-style octave fuzz to higher notes. Slowing down the attack time lets you create some nice volume swells – and as the filter frequency follows the same envelope, you'll hear the tone opening up as the note gets louder, which is a neat effect.



The Chaos toggle introduces glitchy tones by making note tracking less stable

KEY FEATURES

PRICE £179
DESCRIPTION Digital synth pedal. Made in USA
CONTROLS Level, attack, blend, filter cutoff frequency, Chaos toggle switch, square/sawtooth/sine waveform switch
FEATURES Expression pedal input for filter frequency; true bypass, powered by 9-volt mains supply only (not included)
DIMENSIONS 123 x 98 x 52mm
CONTACT Keeley Engineering
robertkeeley.com

What's not quite so useful, at least with a clean signal, is the blend control – because a plunky guitar and a buzzy synth go together like chocolate and cheese. Stick a high-gain distortion pedal in front of the Synth-1, however, and the inclusion of a blending option makes more sense. Now your guitar can sound like a guitar again, just with an added dash of lunacy.

8/10 **A tidy collection of old-school synth tones in one small box**

LIKE THIS? TRY THESE...

Electro-Harmonix Mono Synth **£115**, Meris Enzo **£319**, Seymour Duncan Fooz **£339**

Select between square, sawtooth and sine waveforms to change the basic character of your guitar tone, then adjust further with the filter controls

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Fantastic condition. 3 Piece Maple Neck. 3 Piece Maple Top. Original Hardware & Pick-ups. Includes Original Hard Case.

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Tokai LS110 Love Rock
Finished in Vintage Sunburst. Made in Japan. PAF Style Pickups. Vintage Style Hardware. Rosewood Fingerboard. Includes Hard Case.

Taylor 412e Grand Concert
Solid Sitka Spruce Top. Solid Ovangkol Back & Sides. Built in Taylor Expression 2 Pickup System. With Original Hard Case and Docs.

Taylor 524e Grand Auditorium
All Mahogany. Built in Expression 2 Pickup System. Made from Tropical Mahogany. Ebony Fingerboard. Original hardcase & docs.

Levinson Blade B4 Custom Jazz Bass
Made in Japan. 1994. Ash Body. Active Electronics. Maple Neck. Gary Levinson Custom Pickups. Super Versatile Bass!

Fender 2014 American Std P Bass
Maple Neck. Tortoise Shell Pickguard. Traditional Split P Bass Pickup with Tone & Volume Controls. Excellent Condition.

Ibanez SR650 ABS
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In Stock - Just arrived! Classic Ricki Design. Rosewood fingerboard. Maple Hollowbody. Hi-gain pickps. With Hard case.

Rickenbacker 330/12 Fireglo
Deluxe Hollow Body with a special contoured body. Rosewood Fingerboard with Triangular Inlays. Made in USA. With Hard Case.

Fender American Performer Telecaster
Humbucking pickup in Neck position & Yosemite Single coil in Bridge. Finished in Aubergine. Includes Padded Gig Bag.

Fender American Performer Strat
Alder Body. SSS. Yosemite Single Coil Pickups. Push-pull activates neck pickup. Finished in Penny. Maple Fingerboard. Inc Gig Bag.

Rickenbacker 4003 Midnight Blue
Brand New! Stunning Deep Blue finish. A Classic Timeless Bass guitar. More Photos & info online. Comes with Hard Case.

Sandberg Basic VM4 EB (Black Satin)
Made in Germany. Ash Body. Split Coil & Powerhumbucker Pickups. Active 2 Band Tone. Six bolt Maple Neck.

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DO IT YOURSELF

HOW TO INSTALL A BIGSBY ON A GIBSON ES-335

WORDS & PHOTOGRAPHY HUW PRICE

They fell out of favour for a long time, but these days, having a Bigsby on a vintage-style Gibson is a cool as it gets. Here, we show you how it's done and make a few other tweaks along the way in pursuit of the ultimate ES-335…

Only relic finishes cause more of a commotion in the online guitar community than the humble Bigsby tailpiece, but converts to the waggle-wand of pure shimmering joy will tell you that these chunks of sandcast aluminium still represent the most expressive and musical vibrato system ever invented for guitarists. Here, I'm taking a recent Gibson Memphis 1958 ES-335 reissue and swapping the stopbar for a Bigsby B7.

There are, of course, several innovative ways to install a Bigsby without making permanent modifications to your guitar, but the prevailing feeling in this office is still that sonically speaking, there's no substitute for screwing that thing directly into the body.

With that commitment made and the guitar in bits on the workbench, it seems sensible to take the opportunity to make some further upgrades – including the pickups. Time to see if an already very good guitar can be made into a great one…

WIGGLE ROOM

It's vital to get a B7 positioned on the centre line, but Bigsby hinges always have a bit of play in them. This means you can fine-tune the position of the front section to ensure that the strings follow as straight a path as possible over the bridge, under the roller and onto the securing pins.

I begin by removing the guitar's stop tailpiece, tailpiece bolts and strap button. With the button removed, masking tape is used to mark the centre of the button's screw hole. This helps to position the Bigsby dead centre and it needs to be held in place.

Although the vintage-style strap button on this reissue model is made from white plastic, it's drilled for a long fixing screw. This is ideal, because it can anchor the Bigsby while I get everything aligned. The Bigsby B7 has an opening for a strap button in the hinge plate; I have to use a large washer so the button screw can clamp the Bigsby in place. It probably wouldn't be sufficient under full string tension, but it will do for now.

B7 models are easier to fit than some other Bigsby tailpieces because they're screwed into the top of the guitar. Being fixed in this way means that uneven string tension cannot pull them out of whack: but of course, you do need to be absolutely sure that the position is correct before committing to those screw holes.

To help with alignment of the tailpiece, I fit both the E strings to the guitar and tune them up just enough to eliminate any slackness. Next, a large clamp with cork protection pads is gently tightened, allowing the Bigsby to be adjusted but stay where it's put.

Once I'm convinced that the alignment is as good as it's going to get, I tighten the clamp a little more and drill pilot holes for the four fixing screws at the back and the two on the top.

The screws are put in – for this job, it's important to use a screwdriver that fits the screw heads properly and applying a little wax on the screw threads can help to ease the process.

OPPOSITE TOP The strap-button screw will be useful for anchoring the Bigsby while it's being positioned

OPPOSITE To hold the Bigsby in place, a large washer is used between the strap button and the hinge plate

ABOVE The E strings are loosely tensioned to help line up the Bigsby and establish where the screw holes need to go

LEFT A large clamp with protective cork pads holds the Bigsby firm while the screw-hole positions are marked onto masking tape

ABOVE Pilot holes for the hinge-plate screws are drilled into the side of the body at the tail

RIGHT The Bigsby screws and button are done – and we'll do the two top screws next

STAYING GROUNDED

Hopefully, it's apparent that fitting a Bigsby isn't a particularly daunting undertaking. There is, however, a complicating factor because without the stop tailpiece, the strings aren't connected to ground and the guitar will generate unwanted noise.

Gibsons with stop tailpieces and wrapover bridges have ground wires in the bushing holes. Although the wire is still in situ, now we've installed the Bigsby, the strings are connected to the tailpiece and don't make contact with the stud bushings. To re-establish a ground connection, I have to run a wire from the Bigsby and I want it to be invisible.

The standard way to do this with semis and semi-solids is to drill a hole through the side of the body at the tail, where it will be hidden by a Bigsby or trapeze tailpiece. With hollowbodies such as ES-330s, Casinos and so forth, you can drill straight through; however, the centre-block complicates things with semi-solids.

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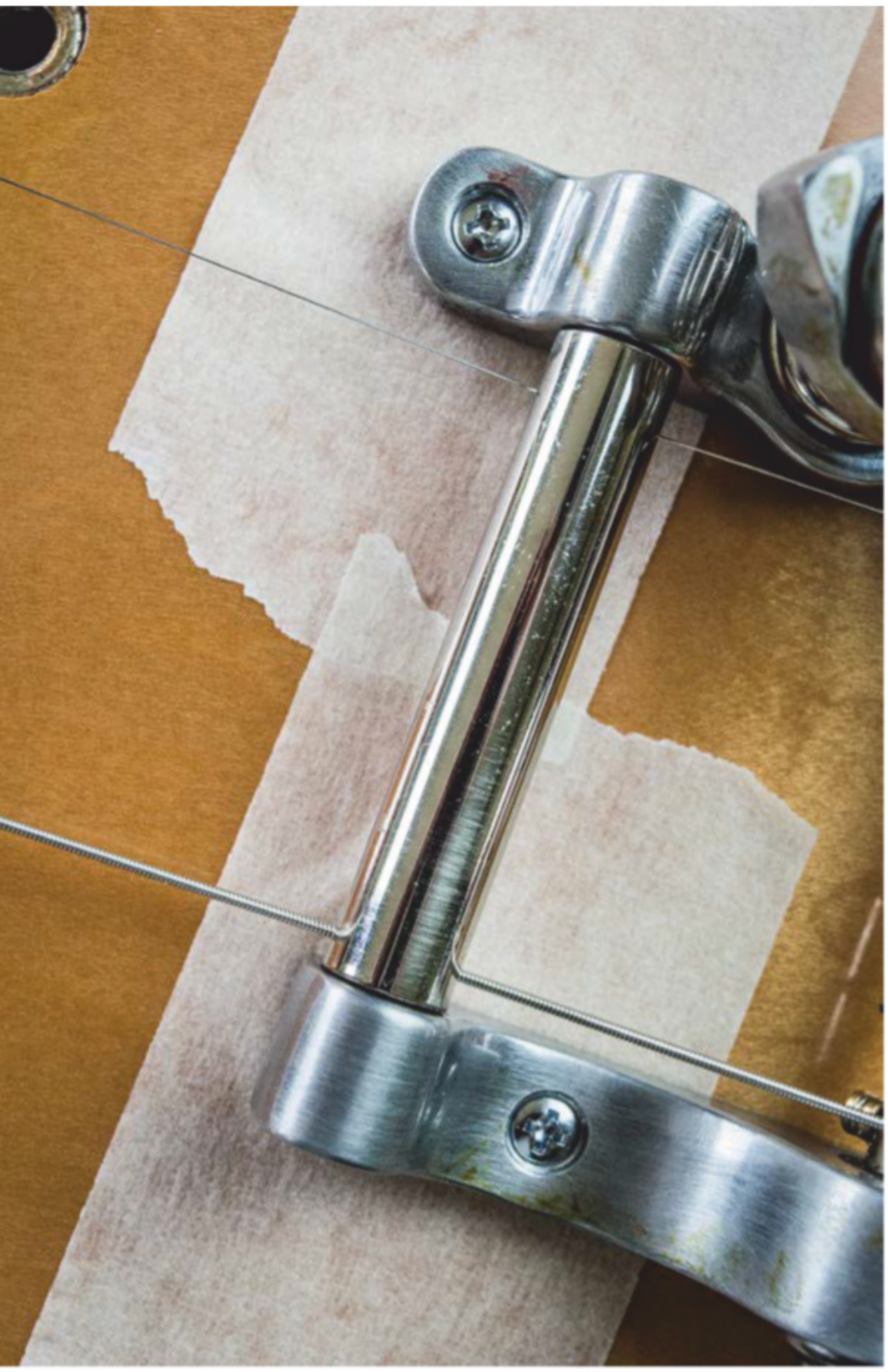

To get a ground wire into the body, I have to drill through the side at an angle using a 100mm-long drill bit. It sounds straightforward, but I don't want the drill bit to skate across the glossy lacquer and create an unsightly scratch – even if that'd accelerate the natural relic'ing process…

To prevent this from happening, I drill a pilot hole about 5mm deep using a drill bit with a wider diameter than the bit I'm using for the ground-wire hole. This allows me to get the end of the ground-wire drill bit inside the pilot hole and it prevents the bit from sliding as I get the hole started.

The bit is just long enough and I take care not to press too hard, because I don't want the drill's chuck to hit the guitar when the bit breaks through the side of the block.

A length of black, cloth-covered braided wire is prepared by stripping of a few centimetres at the end and tinning the exposed wire with solder.

Few soldering irons are powerful enough to solder onto a Bigsby, but simply screwing the hinge plate tight against the wire provides more than adequate contact. The other end of the ground wire can be soldered onto one of the braided pickups wires or a pot casing, and everything will work as before.

PECULIAR CUSTOMS

Up until 1965, ES-335s had stop tailpieces and the bodies came off the production line with bushing holes. Clearly, the bushings weren't required if a Bigsby was being fitted and something had to be done about the two holes. When Gibson installed Bigsbys to factory guitars, they were considered custom orders and plastic covers were made to conceal the bushing holes.

These covers were engraved with 'Custom Made' and a star motif at each end. Leaving the bushings in situ beneath the cover allowed owners to change their minds about the Bigsby and revert back to a stop tailpiece – something many did as Bigsbys fell out of favour.

Replica 'Custom Made' plates that look the part are few and far between, but Peter Wilson Guitars on Reverb.com makes pristine and aged versions that are about the best we've seen.

The nicely relic'd plate arrived with adhesive backing for fixing to the guitar – I've never found applying stickers to nitro finishes works out well in the long term, but since some of these cover plates were originally fitted with metal pins, they would look vintage-correct on this guitar.

I'm disinclined to make unnecessary holes in the guitar's top, so instead I'm trying something I've seen on other Bigsby-loaded Gibsons. The trick is to wedge wooden dowels into the bushings and tap the pins for the 'Custom Made' plate into the dowels. In this case, 7mm dowels are the best fit, holding tight enough, but still easy to pull out. I simply push the dowels in and mark the top of the bushings with a pencil. The dowels are removed, cut to the required length and then pushed back into the bushings.

To get everything lined up, I use one of the finest, most versatile and indispensable

tools available to luthiers – a roll of masking tape. Generally speaking, I prefer the low-tack variety and you can use it for protecting paintwork, clamping binding, retrieving lost parts through f-holes, marking out and plenty more besides.

By establishing the exact positions of the dowels, I'm able to drill through the cover plate in the centre of the star motifs. The plate is then held in position by masking tape as I gently tap in a brass escutcheon pin at each end. It's probably an affectation, but I drilled the holes through the cover plate by eye so they'd end up very slightly off-centre – simply because that's the way vintage ones always appear.

COVER VERSIONS

No guitar revamp would be complete without a pickup upgrade and the pickups of choice here are a second-hand set of Monty's PAFs. Some people are highly attuned to the look of PAF replica covers and although the original Monty's covers have a nice patina, the guitar's owner has managed to source some covers from German pickup makers Amber with the look he prefers – complete with vintage corners and radiuses, and even tiny punch recesses around the screw holes. Here's how I swap PAF covers…

The pickup covers are fixed onto the baseplates by two blobs of solder. Rather than attempt to desolder the covers, it's actually easier to slip a very fine saw blade between the cover and the base plate and then saw through the joint. Be patient, keep the saw square and angle it so the blade doesn't cut into the edges of the cover or go too deep inside and damage the bobbins or coils. The covers may need to be lightly clamped to hold them steady while you're sawing. But don't clamp the areas adjacent to the joints, or you may find it impossible to get your saw blade between the cover and the baseplate.

Having broken through the solder joints, the covers lift off fairly easily. The new covers are pushed on and I clamp them tight ready to be soldered on. I also discover that it's better for the pickups to be placed upright and on their sides rather than flat, while soldering the joints.

Gravity is your friend and the molten solder will flow where it's needed rather than pool up on the baseplate. After a quick resistance check with a multimeter to ensure I haven't broken the pickups, they're ready to be installed.

OPPOSITE LEFT With two screws in the top, there's no going back now

OPPOSITE RIGHT TOP The Bigsby can be removed to drill the channel for the ground wire

OPPOSITE RIGHT The ground wire pushes through the centre-block and into the body. The exposed metal contacts the hinge plate

ABOVE TOP Masking tape allows us to mark out the exact position for the bushing cover plate

ABOVE Lengths of 7mm-diameter dowel are pushed into the bushing holes

LEFT Getting everything lined up properly allows us to fix the cover plate using escutcheon pins tapped into the dowels

SWAP STOP

Here's where we hit our first and only snag – on this guitar, Gibson Memphis faithfully recreated the earlier ES-335 construction style with no wiring-loom access hole in the side of the bridge-pickup rout. The entire loom went in through the f-hole at the factory, but after an hour or so of trying, I'll concede it's going to take a better luthier than me to get the damn thing back out.

Besides which, the second-hand Monty's PAFs came out of a Les Paul and since the wires were cut accordingly, they are too short to reach the volume controls anyway. Instead, I decide to de-solder the existing pickup wires while working through the f-holes and run fresh wires from the volume pots to the pickup cavities.

I then install an electrical screw terminal in each pickup hole to create solderless connections for the pickups. This means they won't need to be sent back for new lead-out wires to be attached and swapping them out to try different pickups in future will be quick and easy.

GETTING A HANDLE

No doubt many ES-335 owners have considered having a Bigsby conversion, but may have shied away due to concerns about it adversely affecting tone. Having previously tried a stock trapeze tailpiece on my own ES-330 – just out of curiosity – I

ABOVE A thin-bladed veneer saw cuts through the solder joints and allows the Monty's PAFs to be removed from their covers

ABOVE RIGHT The replacement cover is clamped tightly onto the pickup and new solder joints are made to hold it

RIGHT The Monty's cover is on the left and the more vintage-correct cover is on the right

BELOW Screw connectors are used to get around the problem of short pickup lead-out wires and they should be placed on the opposite side to the pole screws

OPPOSITE The 335, post makeover – improved looks, playability, tone and sustain

quickly reverted to the Bigsby for the extra midrange weight and sustain it provides.

Clearly a stop tailpiece semi-solid is a very different proposition, but not so long ago, I fitted a vintage Bigsby B7 to a 1964 ES-335. Now before any of you begin rattling off outraged emails, I should point out that the guitar in question left the factory with a Vibrola – a device that adds a lot of unnecessary weight, feels somewhat unnatural to use and generally results in tuning chaos.

The owner had removed the Vibrola and even sourced a vintage aluminium tailpiece. Although the guitar sounded fantastic, he couldn't live with all the holes in the top and decided a B7 would improve the look. Neither of us expected it to improve the tone too, but that's exactly what happened. And it's the same story with this guitar.

In a nutshell, the B7 somehow manages to enhance the 'semi' without detracting from the 'solid' character of an ES-335. To my ears, the tone is freed up and more dynamic. Sustain was impressive to start with, but it's even better with the Bigsby, and there now appears to be an extra degree of woodiness and harmonic complexity. Granted, Bigsbys aren't for everybody, but tone suckers they emphatically are not.

Of course, none of this matters unless the pickups are capable of capturing the enhanced acoustic qualities. Monty's are among our favourite PAF replicas, and they perform exactly as expected. Their naturally bright, clear and detailed character suits this guitar perfectly and no doubt this revamped ES-335 will be seeing action very soon indeed.

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Texan blues-rocker Billy Gibbons takes simple minor pentatonic ideas and adds expression through bends, doublestops and pinched harmonics

EXAMPLE 1

EXAMPLE 2

PART FIVE
THE MINOR PENTATONIC SCALE

WORDS LEIGH FUGE

For the fifth instalment of our guide to the basics of blues, we move away from chords, and into the wonderful world of lead guitar…

Now that you've got your 12-bar rhythms nailed and you've started to learn about turnarounds, the next step is to start to integrate the idea of some lead guitar into what we do. Lead guitar is something to which no blues aficionado will be a stranger. There are a lot of notes on the guitar, so where do we start?

There is one scale type which has become a mainstay in every blues guitarist's arsenal: the minor pentatonic. Cast your mind back to lesson one, where we discussed the idea that everything comes from the major scale. We will be using the same A major scale we used in the first lesson to create our minor pentatonic scale.

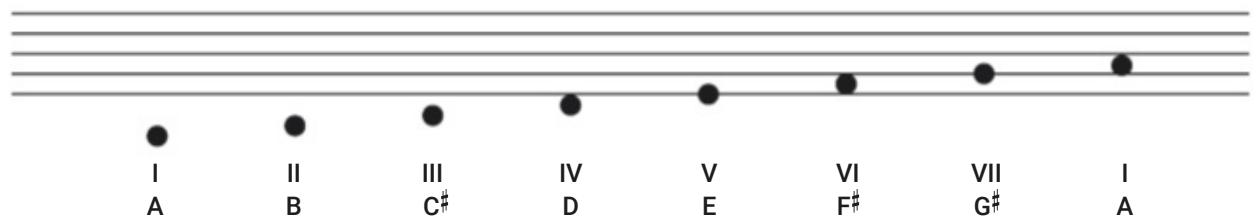
Once we have this scale, we will be constructing a scale using specific intervals from it. We will stick with the key of A minor and we will be using the intervals in the diagram below.

The first thing you'll notice is that there are two intervals included that aren't in the major scale, the ♭III and the ♭VII. Their non-flat equivalents are in the major scale. Similar to when you flatten the third interval to give you a minor chord, in the case of pentatonic scales, you're flattening the third and seventh interval. The pentatonic scale is only made up of five notes, so the second and sixth intervals are not used ('penta' meaning five).

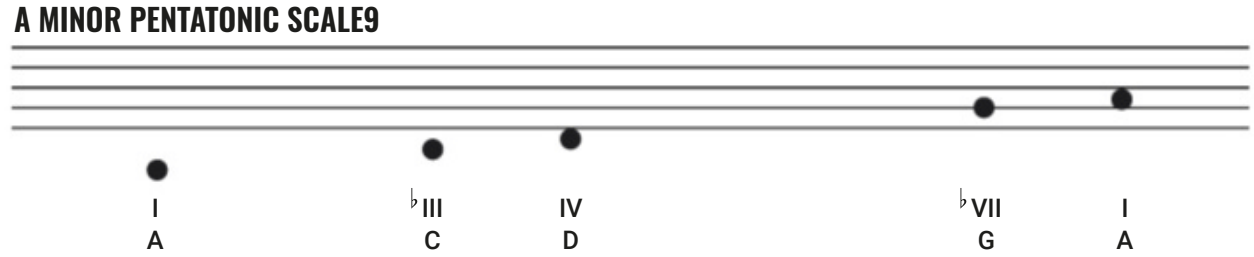
The five notes that make up this scale are found all over the fretboard in different positions. The scale has five shapes – Example 1 above uses the first shape of the scale descending as TAB and Example2 shows it again, but ascending.

You might be thinking: there are 12 notes written on that scale, but we said it was only five. The reason for this is that the notes repeat. The scale has three root notes:

A MAJOR SCALE



A MINOR PENTATONIC SCALE9



EXAMPLE 3

EXAMPLE 4

the fifth fret on the sixth (low E) string, the seventh fret on the fourth (D) string and the fifth fret on the first (high E) string. The notes in between these root notes are your C, D, E and G respectively.

One easy pitfall for all guitar players when learning scales is to fall into the trap of playing the scale in a linear fashion, always moving up and down by one note that follows the note before. Scales should be used as a guideline to what you *can* play, not what you *should* play.

The two exercises above (Examples 3 and 4) break the scale up into ascending and descending four-note groupings and work through the scale.

This is a great way to familiarise yourself with the notes of the scale and can also be a good speed builder, so if you want to follow this with a metronome, set your tempo at a comfortable pace and play two notes per click.

TRY IT YOURSELF

The minor pentatonic scale is a transposable scale, meaning you can play the same shape anywhere on the fretboard to suit whatever key you might be playing in. The first note of the scale is the root note which determines your key. Try the scale in some different positions and see how it feels playing the scale around the fretboard. The higher you go, the narrower the frets, which will present a different challenge to playing it somewhere with more space for your fingers.

If you have enjoyed this lesson and you're looking for a guitar tutor in your local area, check out our guitar lessons page at *Guitar.com* and speak to one of our highly recommended teachers. G

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Leigh Fuge is a guitar teacher and professional musician from Swansea in the UK. He's taught hundreds of students face-to-face and via the MGR Music platform. To find a qualified guitar tutor in your area, visit mgrmusic.com

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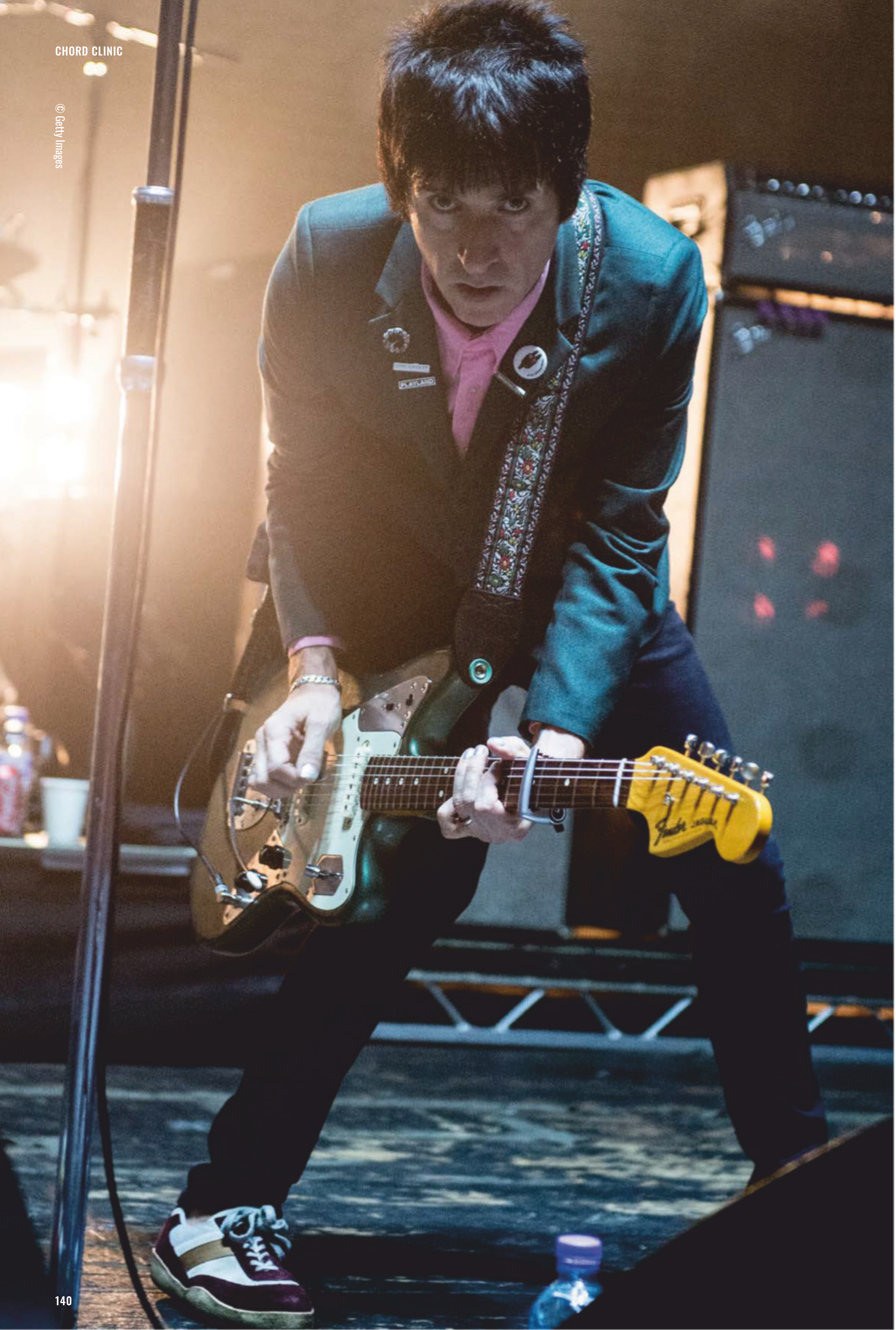

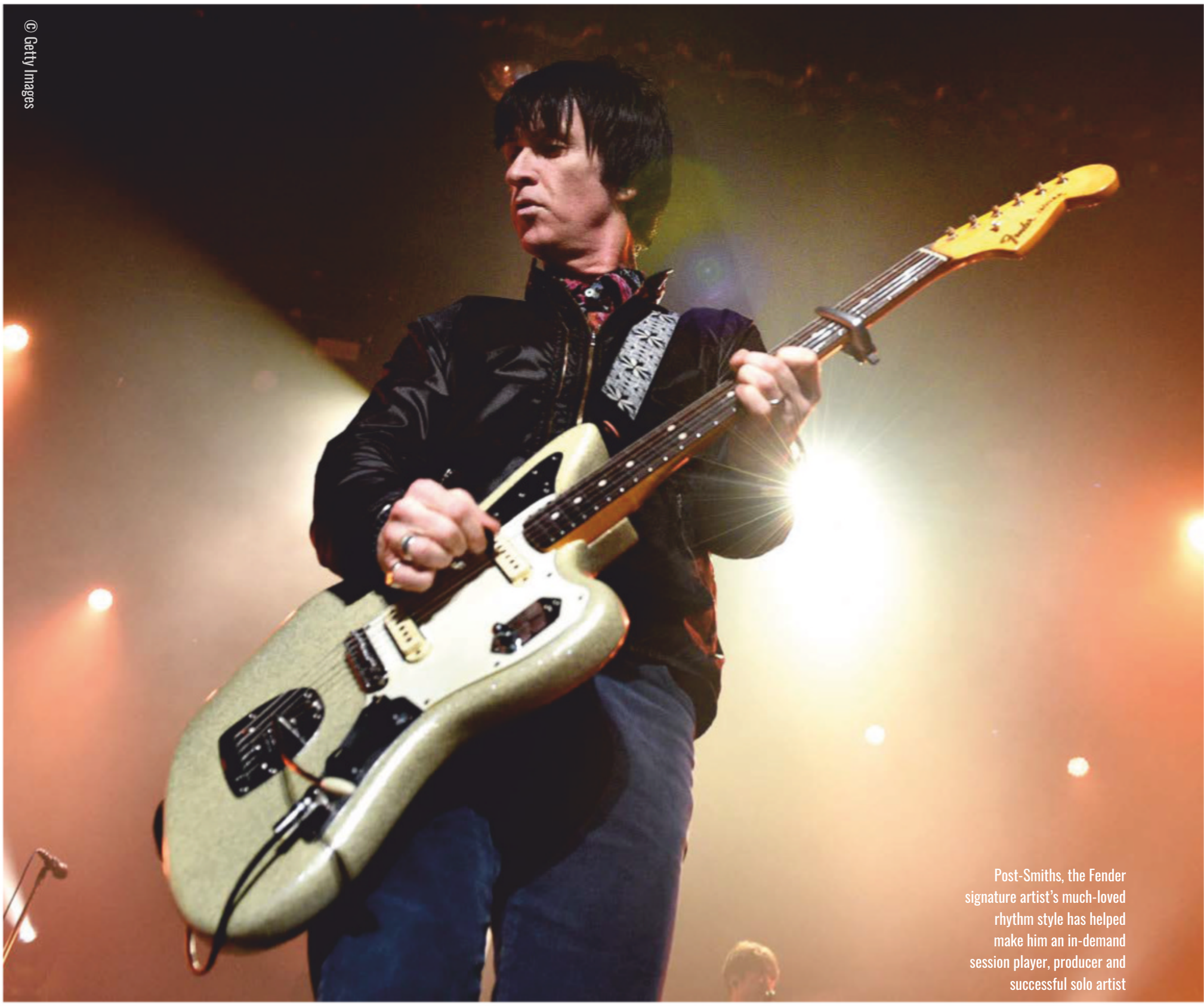

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Post-Smiths, the Fender signature artist's much-loved rhythm style has helped make him an in-demand session player, producer and successful solo artist

CHORD CLINIC

HOW TO PLAY JOHNNY MARR-STYLE CHORDS PART ONE

WORDS ROD FOGG

35 years on from The Smiths' 1984 debut album, the influence of Johnny Marr's guitar playing is hard to exaggerate. We take a look at the chords that make up his captivating chime and jangle…

In 1984, Johnny Marr's guitar playing stood out at a time when many felt pop had become bland and overproduced. Full of chiming and jangly chords, mixed with sustained arpeggio riffing, his playing has come to define the era.

In this instalment of Chord Clinic, we're focusing on strummed chords; in the next, we'll take a look at the arpeggios which are an essential part of his style. Figure 1 kicks off with four chords – each of which is meant to be held for a full bar, in the style of an intro. Choose a bright, clean sound on your electric, add a touch of chorus and a gentle waggle of the whammy bar as the chord dies away. Play on the first beat and let it ring.

You could say that these chords are all in the key of D major, and represent chords IV, I, VI, and V. However, as we will see later, the chords you use for this type of intro don't necessarily have to be harmonically connected – it's more about the colour the chord creates and the linear movement of the notes on the top string.

Added ninth, major seventh and other added note and suspended chords are an important part of this style. Try rearranging the order of the chords, or slipping in a few alternatives, such as C major seven, or E minor nine.

If figure 1 is an intro, then figure 2 is the verse. Pick an easy tempo and play through the chords, two chords per bar. Don't necessarily play all six strings the whole time; start with a big downstroke, and then just concentrate on the higher notes of the chord, emphasising the interval that occurs between the note D on the second (B) string and the open first (E) string.

This is present in the first three chords and is resolved to C sharp in the A major

FIGURE 1

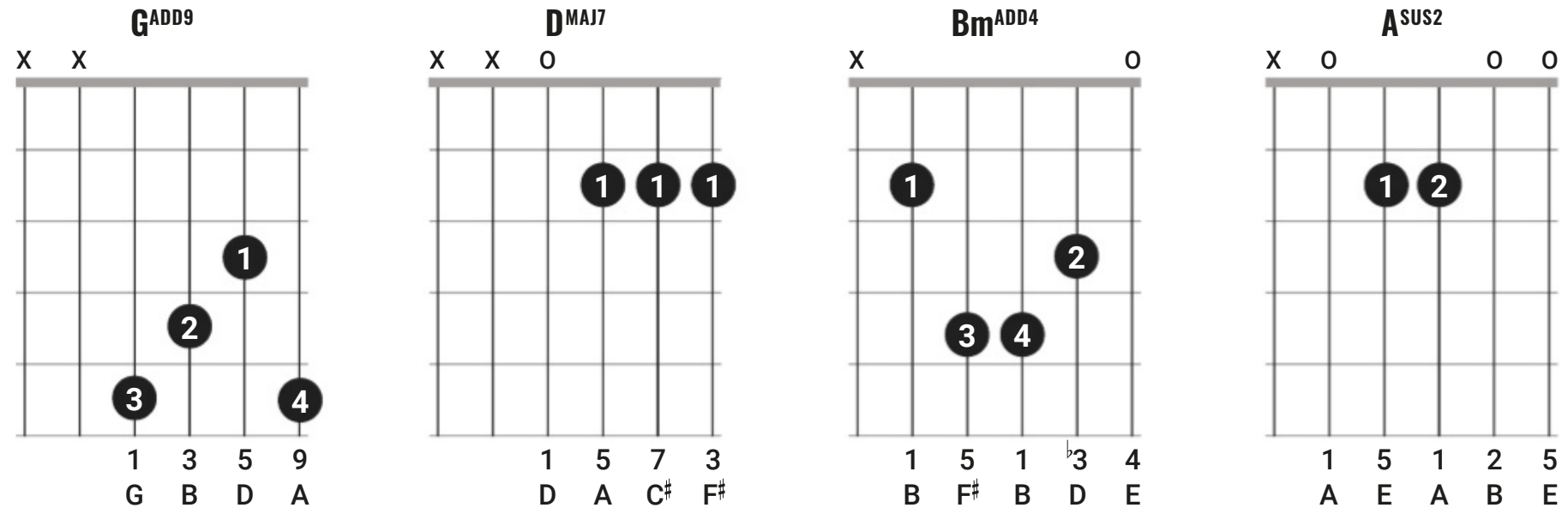


FIGURE 2

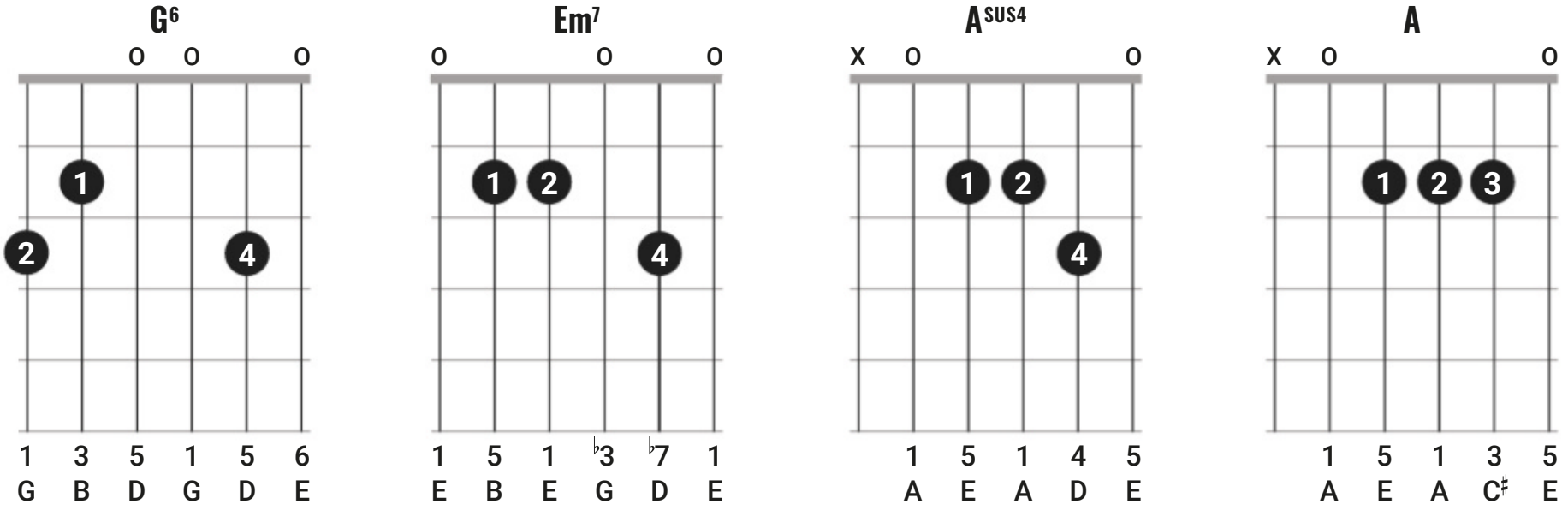


FIGURE 3

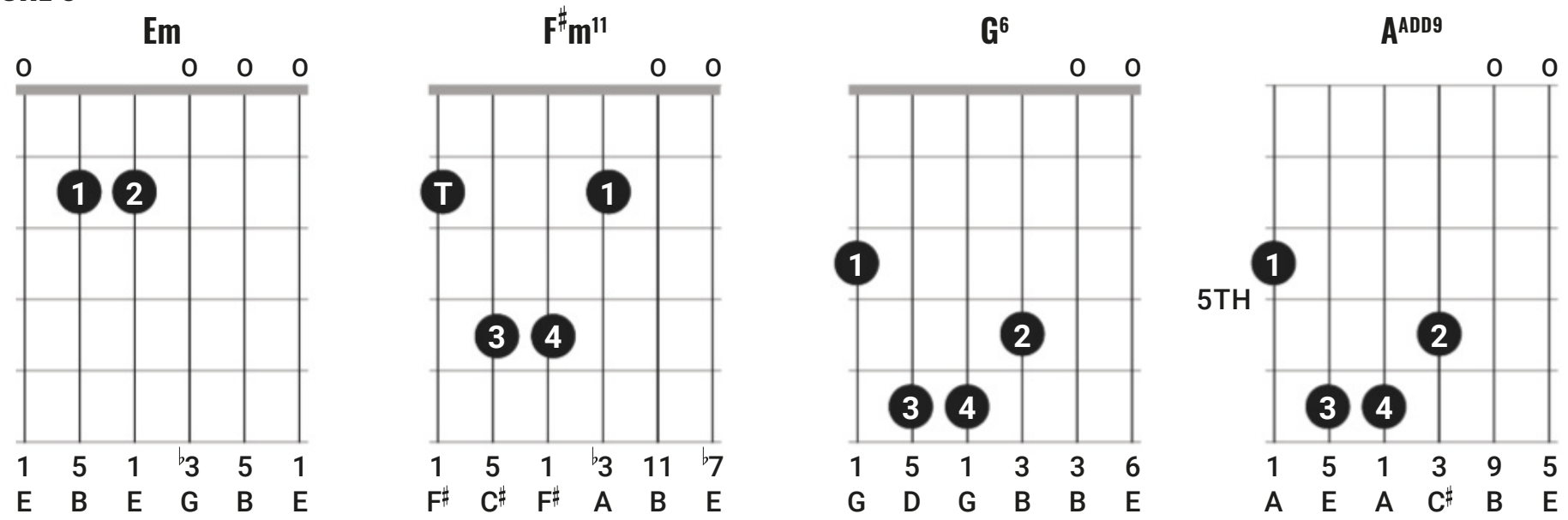
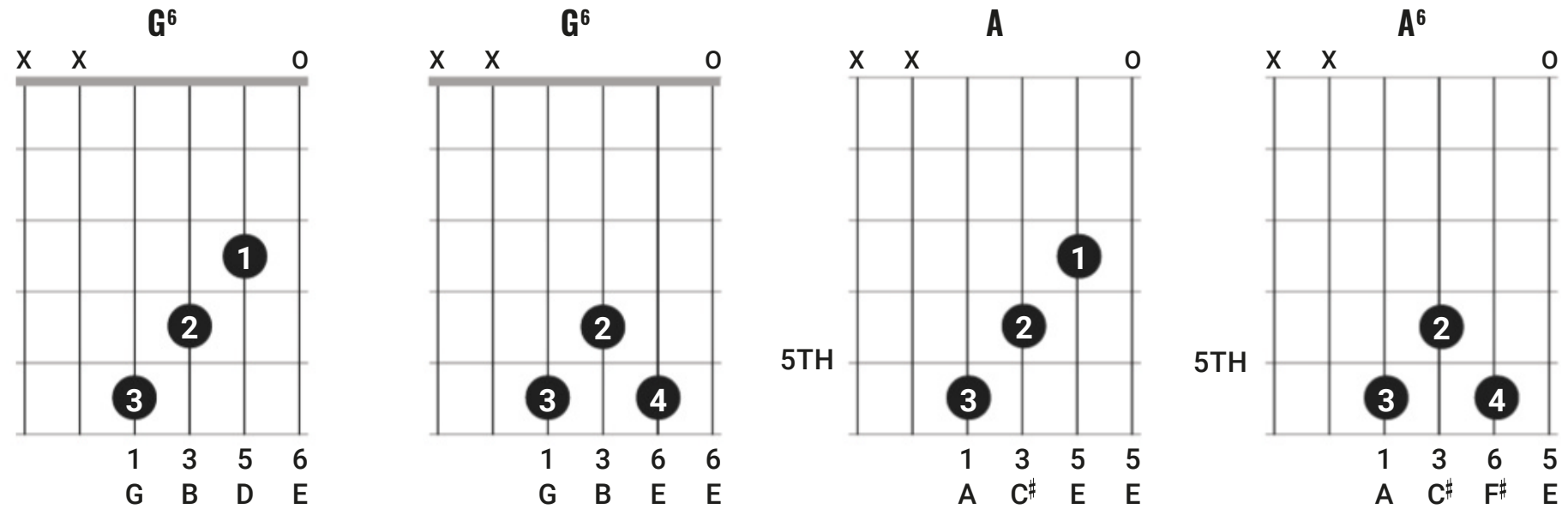


FIGURE 4



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chord. Feel free to repeat this sequence as often as you like – twice, or maybe even four times.

Continuing with our song-like structure, we need a pre-chorus – something which builds towards a chorus. Enter figure 3, where each of the chords gets strummed for four beats and the passage gradually grows in intensity.

Notice that the F#m11 chord has the thumb wrapped over the neck to hold the sixth (low E) string at the second fret, and that the G6 and Aadd9 chords resemble a common barre chord shape, but without the barre, so the top two strings ring open.

Almost every chord we've played so far has had an open sixth (E) string, and open strings are often doubled or sounded with another note which is close in pitch – another essential part of the style. Figure 4 is the chorus, where we need some fast 16th-note strumming, alternating between the two voicings of G6 in one bar and the A and A6 chords in the next bar. For maximum jangle, avoid the lowest two strings. In fact, you could mute the A string using the tip of your third finger, in case you get carried away and catch it with the pick.

At this point, you could head back to figure 1 and play the whole piece again or head for figure 2 and repeat the verse – pre-chorus – chorus structure. Incidentally, a capo can work a strange magic on the guitar; if you have one, try the whole thing again with a capo at the second fret – everything somehow seems much brighter.

Figure 5 demonstrates that not all Johnny Marr's playing involved extended chords. The idea is to play one bar of A minor, with the next two chords sharing the next bar. Repeat and repeat, and hopefully, you will find a hypnotic quality emerging.

Of course, it might help if you could invent some miserabilist teenage lyrics to go with it. Incidentally, this one works well on acoustic and should also be tried with a capo at the second fret.

In figure 6, we're returning to the idea of our opening chords, this time with a set of chords which are not so clearly related or found in any single key. When you come to play the Aadd9 chord, lean finger one back a little so that it touches the open third (G) string as we do not want this string to sound. See if you can create some sequences of your own by rearranging the chords in these examples. Go forth and jangle!

FIGURE 5

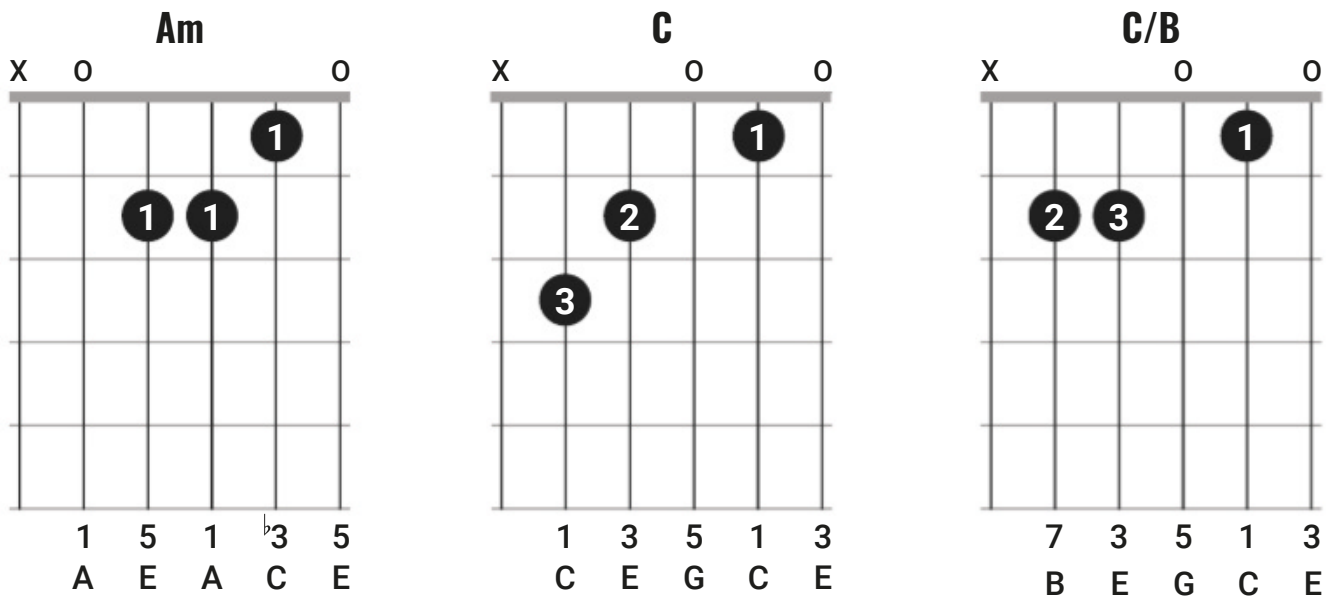
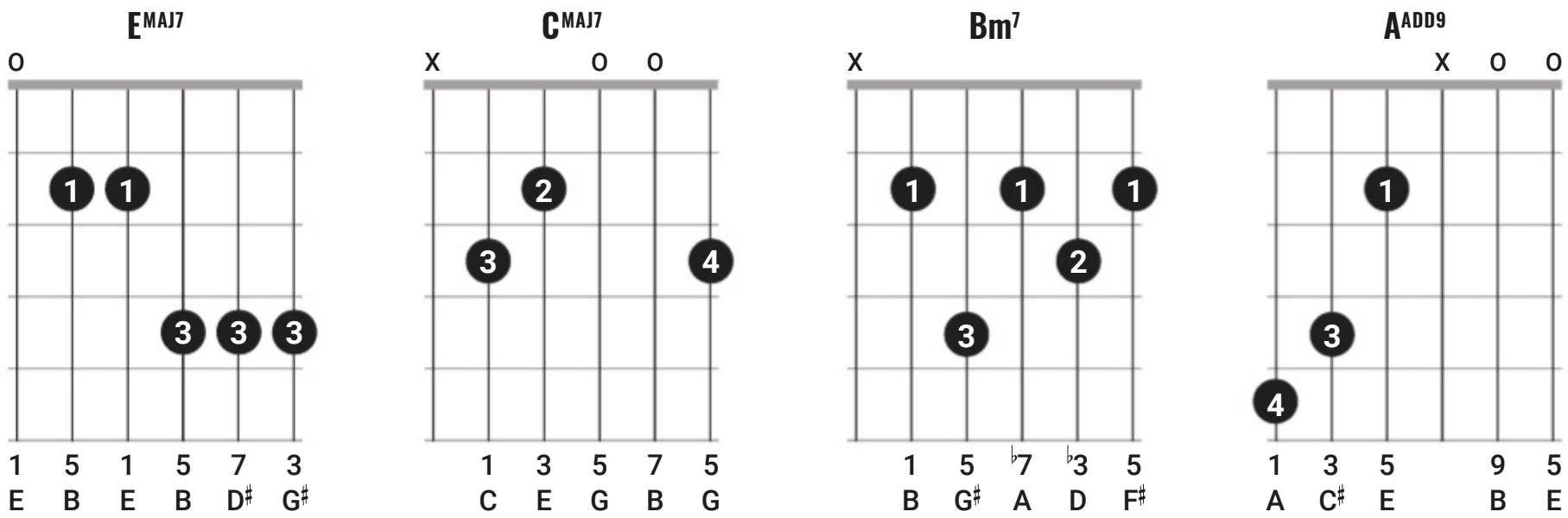
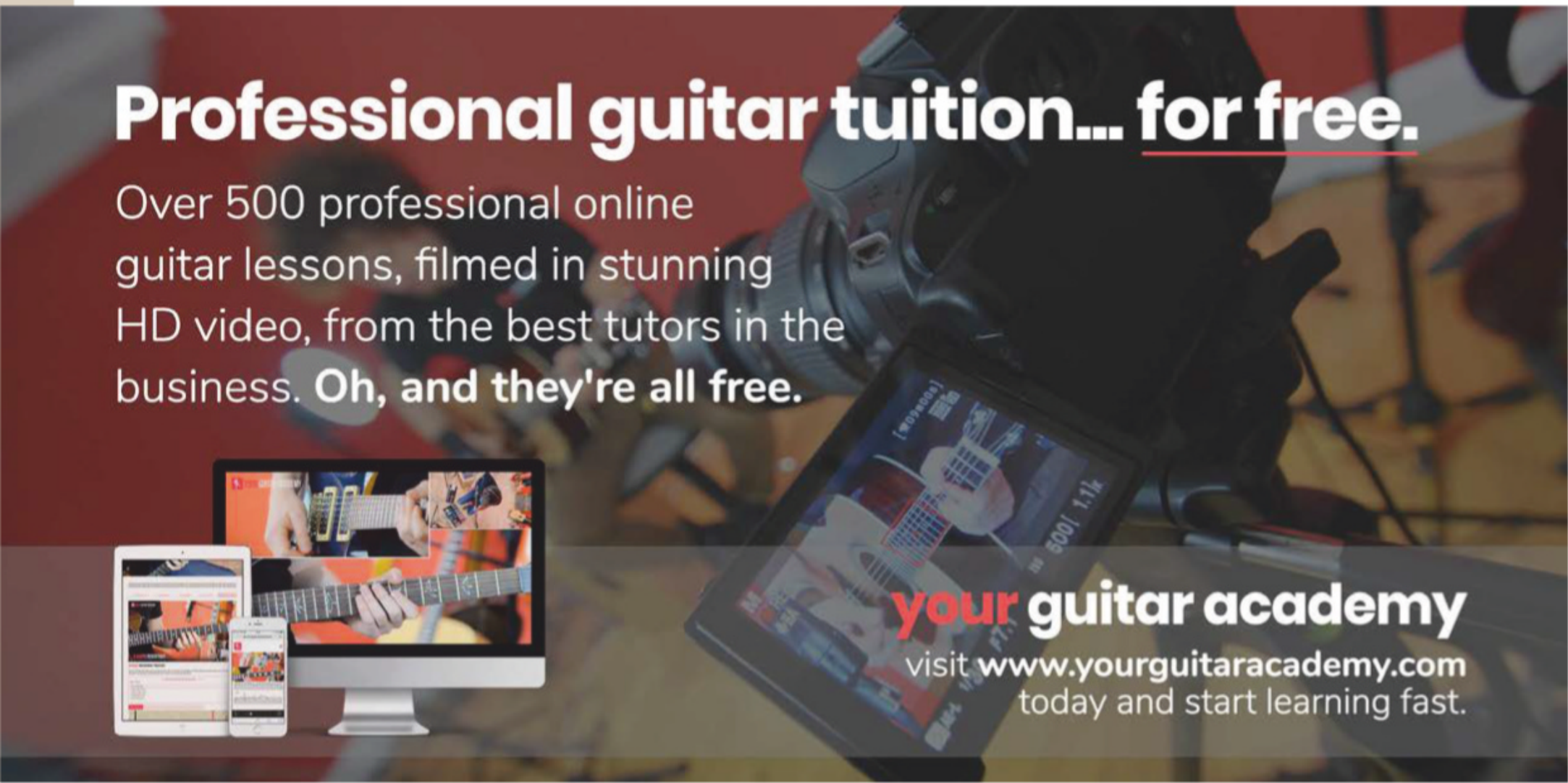


FIGURE 6





TALKBOX

ROB CHAPMAN

INTERVIEW JOSH GARDNER

The YouTube star and Chapman Guitars head honcho on getting lost backstage, action figures and the importance of a good tuner…

The moment it all started…
"At the age of 15 I first heard U2's *Rattle And Hum* and in particular *I Still Haven't Found What I'm Looking For*... it completely blew my mind and I was suddenly obsessed with music, The Kinks, Beatles – anything in my parents record collection really, from Tina Turner through to Steamhammer."

I couldn't live without my…
"I guess it's a touch dull but really, my Boss tuner. Those things are indestructible, I mean their biggest competition in the marketplace is probably themselves, because they don't break. It's on every board I ever put together."

The one that got away…
"When I was 20, I sold an Ibanez Floral JEM to a guitar store in Twickenham. My cat had an accident and I needed cash quick to help pay for an operation on his leg. It was one of the original run, and I kicked myself when I later went to buy it back and they asked me for twice the price I had sold it to them for!"

My signature model would be…
"Chapman Guitars was launched through what was initially a signature guitar, so the ML1 is close in that regard. Since then, I have designed myself two more guitars: the Ghost Fret, which was really my homage to Marty Friedman's Kelly (I was a big fan of his album *Scenes*), and then more recently I designed the ML3-RC, which I'm particularly proud of. I have another in the pipeline, a combination of elements from the first three, something a bit different… it's such an exciting thing to do."

The first thing I play…
"When I first pick up a guitar, I often run a few exercises just to warm up. I think it's important not to become complacent about warming up, that's how injuries occur – luckily, I have never been injured playing and I'm fairly sure it's because I have this habit."

The best advice I've ever been given…
"'Your vibe attracts your tribe' – it's so true, I'm thankful to have such positive, friendly and amazing people around me. I'm continually inspired by the creative flow of people like Hannah Boulton, Pete Honoré, Rabea Massaad, Silvija Vil, Sophie Flattum, Dave Hollingworth… The list goes on! I'm incredibly lucky to have such a wonderful support group of musicians around me."

My Spinal Tap moment…
"I've been lost a couple of times backstage, once or twice I've managed to get myself shut into a separate part of the building by accident. It's because I often go wandering when I'm practising my vocals before a gig and explore too far!"

I wish I was there…
"I mean that's gonna just have to be Woodstock, I would've given anything to have witnessed that, I feel like it was almost a shift in consciousness as well as a ridiculous musical event. I was lucky enough to hear the original tapes being remixed by Eddie Kramer many years ago, that was a ridiculous experience as well."

The first thing on my rider…
"A good-condition, boxed action figure from the 1980s, preferably *Star Wars* – the original holy trinity of films, not the pretend new ones. I love toys, I am unashamedly still a child inside this ageing husk."

If I could just play one thing…
"Yes, that's a great question – I have always been a fan of mountain music, old-style country – the kind of stuff that Dan Tyminski, Ron Block or the amazing Jerry Douglas play in Union Station."

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